



## *Contemplative Studies and the Religious Studies*

### *Classroom*

#### *Spotlight on Teaching*

Sarah Jacoby and Jessica Tinklenberg, Editors

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## Contributors

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**Daniel A. Hirshberg** is assistant professor of religious studies at the University of Mary Washington, where he serves as director of the contemplative studies program and associate director of the Leidecker Center for Asian Studies. Specializing in historiography, hagiography, textual revelation (*gter*), and cultural memory, he received his doctorate in Tibetan studies from Harvard University in 2012. He also holds an MA in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism from Naropa University and a BA in religion from Wesleyan University. His first book, *Remembering the Lotus-Born: Padmasambhava in the History of Tibet's Golden Age* (Wisdom Publications, 2016), focuses on the formulation, emendation, and persistent relevance of narratives describing Tibet's 8<sup>th</sup> century conversion to Buddhism. It won Honorable Mention (second place) for the E. Gene Smith Book Prize from the Association for Asian Studies in 2018. He has also published in *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaine* and *Marginalia*, among other academic and popular forums. He teaches several courses in Asian religions and contemplative studies, and leads study abroad programs in Nepal and Japan.

**Sarah Jacoby** an associate professor in the religious studies department at Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois. She specializes in Tibetan Buddhist studies, with research interests in gender and sexuality, the history of emotions, Tibetan literature, religious auto/biography, Buddhist revelation (*gter ma*), the history of eastern Tibet, and scholarship of teaching and learning. She is the author of *Love and Liberation: Autobiographical Writings of the Tibetan Buddhist Visionary Sera Khandro* (Columbia University Press, 2014), coauthor of *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (Oxford University Press, 2014), and co-editor of *Buddhism Beyond the Monastery: Tantric Practices and their Performers in Tibet and the Himalayas* (Brill, 2009). She teaches courses on Buddhism, gender and sexuality studies, and theory and method in the study of religion. She has just completed her six-year term as cochair of the American Academy of Religion's Tibetan and Himalayan Religions Program Unit, and continues to serve as a member of the AAR's Committee on Teaching and Learning.

**Karolyn Kinane** is associate director for faculty engagement and pedagogy at the University of Virginia Contemplative Sciences Center. Previously, Kinane served as professor and chair of the English department at Plymouth State University (PSU), New Hampshire, where she researched and taught medieval studies, English literature, mysticism, and contemplative reading and writing. Over her thirteen years at PSU, Kinane served as founding codirector of the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning, director of the Medieval and Renaissance Forum, and founding director of Contemplative Communities, a cross-campus initiative that helps students, faculty, staff, and community members explore and develop agency, resilience, purpose, and mindfulness. When she isn't hiking with her dog Buddy, she blogs (<https://collegecontemplative.wordpress.com/>), researches, and teaches on contemplative approaches to teaching and learning.

**Anne Carolyn Klein/Rigzin Drolma** is professor of religion at Rice University and co-founder of Dawn Mountain Center for Tibetan Buddhism ([www.dawnmountain.org](http://www.dawnmountain.org)). Her training, in addition to her academics, includes close study with major Tibetan Lamas in three of Tibet's great traditions, with about ten years overall spent living with these teachers. Her writings and teaching-retreats draw from all these, with special emphasis on Nyingma and *Heart Essence* traditions. Her seven books include *Heart Essence of the Vast Expanse: A Story of Transmission* (Shambhala, 2010); *Knowledge and Liberation: Tibetan Buddhist Epistemology in Support of Transformative Religious Experience* (Snow Lion, 1987), and *Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists, and the Art of the Self* (Snow Lion, 1995). All touch on the profound interplay between head and heart, mind and body; the ordinary and rarified ways of knowing so intimately described in illustrated in Buddhist descriptions of the human capacities for seeing and being.

**Harold D. Roth** is professor of religious studies and founding director of the contemplative studies initiative at Brown University. He is a specialist in Chinese philosophy and textual analysis, the classical Daoist tradition, the comparative study of contemplative experiences, and a pioneer of the academic field of contemplative studies, in which he created the first undergraduate concentration at a major research university in North America. He has published six books and more than fifty scholarly articles in these areas including *Original Tao* (Columbia University press, 1999), a translation and analysis of the oldest text on breath meditation in China, and "Against Cognitive Imperialism: A Call for a Non-Ethnocentric Approach to Cognitive Science and Religious Studies" (*Religion East and West*, issue 8,

2008), a critique of conceptual bias in cognitive sciences and religious studies. He has been the recipient of grants and fellowships from the American Council of Learned Societies, the National Endowment for the Humanities, the Chiang Ching-kuo Foundation for International Scholarly Exchange, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, and the Mind and Life Institute.

**Michael Sheehy** is the director of scholarship at the Contemplative Sciences Center and a research assistant professor in the Department of Religious Studies at the University of Virginia. He leads an interdisciplinary digital research collaborative to publish scholarship in the contemplative humanities and sciences, including the encyclopedic documentation of historical contemplative practice traditions and pedagogical resources. Sheehy has taught at The New School in New York City and Boston College, and was a visiting scholar at Harvard Divinity School. His publications give attention to the literary and philosophical histories of marginalized traditions of Tibetan Buddhism. Most recently, he is interested in the contributions of Buddhism to discourses in the humanities about contemplative experience, and the intersections of Tibetan contemplative traditions with the cognitive sciences and cultural psychology. He is co-editor of the book, *The Other Emptiness: Rethinking the Zhentong Buddhist Discourse in Tibet* (SUNY Press, 2019).

**Judith Simmer-Brown** is Distinguished Professor of Contemplative and Religious Studies at Naropa University, where she is a founding faculty member and has taught for over forty years. Naropa University has pioneered contemplative education, bringing mindfulness and contemplative pedagogies into every academic discipline and every classroom in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and sciences. Simmer-Brown is the founder of the Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education (CACE), and now serves as senior advisor. She is an Acharya (senior dharma teacher) in Shambhala International and teaches meditation widely. She cochairs the Contemplative Studies Unit steering committee for the American Academy of Religion and is author of *Dakini's Warm Breath: The Feminine Principle in Tibetan Buddhism* (Shambhala, 2001) and editor, with Fran Grace, of *Meditation and the Classroom: Contemplative Pedagogy for Religious Studies* (SUNY Press, 2011). She serves as co-editor, with Harold Roth and Amishi Jha, of a new contemplative studies book series for SUNY Press.

## Contemplative Pedagogy and the Religious Studies Classroom

Sarah Jacoby, Northwestern University

The 21<sup>st</sup>-century has seen a rapid expansion of interest in contemplative pedagogy across institutions of higher education, not to mention K-12 education. Even as contemplative pedagogy can be found everywhere from courses on law to language, it has a more complex relationship with religious studies. Although the fiction of pure objectivity has receded in intellectual inquiry more broadly, many religious studies departments defend themselves from critics on all sides by presenting themselves as engaged in the “scientific study of religion” (*religionswissenschaft*). Promoting contemplative practice in the classroom can risk crossing the line into proselytizing, as well as into the culturally imperialist decontextualization and appropriation of others’ traditions, leaving some religious studies scholars wary of first-person approaches to learning that are based on practices associated with particular religions.

On the other hand, given that contemplative pedagogy often involves secularized versions of practices derived from religious contexts, its proponents argue that contemplative pedagogy does not conflict with the academic study of religion. On the contrary, they suggest that religious studies instructors may be the best-informed group of people to implement contemplative pedagogy techniques in our classrooms given that many of us study aspects of the social, historical, linguistic, political, literary, artistic, and philosophical contexts out of which contemplative practices have emerged.

With the complexities as well as the potentially mutually informative potential of religious studies and contemplative pedagogy in mind, we have invited a selection of religious studies teachers to share how they do, and do not, use contemplative pedagogy in their classrooms. Our contributors come from various areas of specialization within religious studies and different types of educational institutions, including public and private universities, as well as religious and secular settings. While some express hesitations about contemplative pedagogy, others are associated with leading contemplative studies centers, namely the University of Virginia Contemplative Sciences Center, Brown University’s Contemplative Studies Initiative, and Naropa University’s Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education. We have asked each contributor to reflect on the following set of questions (without pre-circulating submissions among contributors, to foster diverse responses):

- What is your working definition of contemplative pedagogy?
- What specific teaching methods/assignments/learning structures have you found to be the most effective approaches to enacting contemplative pedagogy in your religious studies classroom?
- Would you recommend a set of “best practices” for those experimenting with contemplative pedagogies?

- What does it mean to incorporate critical first-person approaches in your teaching? Can you provide an example of how this works in your classroom?
- What is the relationship between contemplative pedagogy and critical thinking?
- What is the relationship at your institution between contemplative pedagogy and religious studies as an academic discipline?
- What are the promises and potential pitfalls of contemplative pedagogy as you understand it?
- How do you hope to see contemplative pedagogy develop moving forward?

Candy Gunther Brown's essay is a statement about "Why I do *Not* Use Contemplative Pedagogy in the Public University Classroom." She defines contemplative pedagogy as "approaches to teaching and learning that encourage participation in 'critical first-person,' 'experiential,' 'introspective' exercises, many of which are derived from religious or spiritual traditions, though they are sometimes reframed as secular." Brown maintains the boundary between teaching "about contemplative practices" and teaching students "to *perform*" these practices. She questions whether the efforts many contemplative pedagogy proponents make to foreground students' subjective experiences and a critical investigation of them in fact subtly promote culturally specific worldviews. Brown neither requires nor encourages students to perform contemplative practices in educational contexts out of respect for cultural and religious diversity, as well as the risks of cultural appropriation and cultural imperialism. Even if instructors present contemplative practices in secularized forms, Brown suggests that contemplative practices often are only partly disentangled from their religious roots. She recommends that instructors experimenting with contemplative pedagogy learn the histories and contexts of the contemplative practices they teach, as well as the strengths and weaknesses of scientific evidence supporting their effects. She concludes that informed consent in school situations should involve an opt-in model and occur outside of required classroom hours. For a more comprehensive treatment of these topics, Candy Gunther Brown's new book has just been published: *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools* (University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

Kathleen Fisher's essay "Making Reading Relevant: Critical Thinking as Contemplative Practice" describes a pedagogy she calls "Torah Study," because it is derived from the traditional study partnerships called *havruta* used in Talmudic study. By this, she means a slow, careful line-by-line reading that students do in pairs including reading text sections aloud to each other, pausing, and considering different interpretations. Fisher finds that this approach helps students "to drink deeply" from books, breaking down their antipathy toward reading ancient works, and making these readings more relevant to them. Fisher cautions against drawing an opposition between critical thinking and contemplative techniques to reading, such as her version of Torah Study. For Fisher, reading "critically" is developing the same faculties cultivated by contemplative practices, such as focus, attention to detail, and openness to multiple possibilities. Fisher notes that because Torah Study is rooted in a specific faith community, those who teach outside of theological contexts and/or at public institutions would need to secularize the religious pedigree of this reading technique. She reflects about the ethics of being an outsider to Judaism using this technique in her Catholic-college context, but ultimately decides that "this method of close reading does more good than harm" to her students because it combines critical analysis with meaning and self-knowledge.

Daniel Hirshberg applies contemplative pedagogy to a topic that few college teachers haven't despaired about: the compelling nature of smartphones. In "Contemplating the Smartphone Dis/Connect," Hirshberg avers that "few among us, regardless of when we were born, have more deliberately explored the maladaptive behaviors of our technology usage, nor consistently applied alternatives to remedy them." He seeks to do just this by introducing a "Smartphone Dis/Connect: FOMO" exercise in his classroom, one that he graciously shares with us in full in the Appendix, so you can try it in your class (I'm eager to try it!). Hirshberg calls attention to the high valuation in contemplative pedagogy on "first-person content and discourse: students explore their own subjective experience as a legitimate object of critical inquiry." In his treatment, contemplative pedagogy also involves second-person approaches to learning, meaning those that emphasize dialogical interaction between students, which he suggests is becoming more essential in this era of "technological disconnection." His exercise focuses in particular on the anxiety our smartphones produce within us by fostering a collective-contemplation experience in which participants sit in meditation and observe their thoughts a) while their smartphones are off and b) with their smartphones on and all alerts set a full volume, but out of reach. Students and instructor then share their experiences with each other, and they brainstorm together about skillful and deliberate ways to use smartphones.

Karolyn Kinane's "Critical, Creative, Contemplative" makes a case that the purpose of education is more than inculcating critical-thinking skills; it is about helping students flourish by building their senses of agency and resiliency. She brings this insight into her role as associate director for faculty engagement and pedagogy at the University of Virginia Contemplative Sciences Center. In Kinane's words, contemplative pedagogy uses practices to attend to the inner-world of students in order to augment their capacities to "notice existing cognitive, affective, and somatic habits; bring critical reflection to bear upon them; move toward course material, fellow students, and our larger communities with the awareness that arises from practice." Kinane suggests that contemplative practices such as deep listening, journaling, and meditation can serve as "first-person critical approaches" to learning. She takes us through a four-part "contemplative reading" practice that she uses in her senior seminar "Mysticism and Contemplation," including 1) noticing their responses to the reading, 2) pausing and exploring those responses, 3) returning to the text to critically examine it, and 4) reflecting on what the text has to teach about its topic. The strength of her approach is built upon its combination of both critical and contemplative-reading strategies, which she views as complementary, involving on the one hand dissecting and analyzing texts, and on the other hand the pursuit of connection, communion, and understanding. Kinane brings a clear-eyed view of both the riches of contemplative pedagogy for religious studies, given its subject matter of "centuries of wisdom on what it means to be human," as well as the risks, such as the concern that contemplative pedagogy is a covert form of proselytizing, and one that is rife with cultural appropriation. Nevertheless, she puts forth a powerful argument that contemplative pedagogy enhances what higher education should be about: advancing human flourishing.

Anne Carolyn Klein's "Simplicity: Portals to the Contemplative" is informed by her dual roles as professor of religion at Rice University and founding director of Dawn Mountain Center for Tibetan Buddhism. Klein notes the complex relationship between academic inquiry and religion, but she draws on her

extensive research and contemplative practice in Tibetan Buddhist studies to demonstrate the value of pursuing different ways of knowing—including the intellect—but not reducing the pursuit of knowledge to intellectual inquiry alone. In Klein’s words, “I believe this clarification of skills not accounted for in our appreciation of intellectual discernment is the most important element to emphasize in a general contemplative studies orientation.” The aim of a contemplative orientation is “being in touch with what is going on in your own mind and body at a particular moment” instead of identifying completely with the story or judgment occurring internally. Instead of moving without notice from “how it feels to what I think,” Klein invites us to probe the nuances of our felt experience, refusing the habit to dismiss this exploration and get lost in the “what” of our mind’s contents. She shares with us small exercises and more traditional meditations that she has found useful to bring students fully into their experiences in the classroom and beyond.

Harold Roth’s essay emerges out of his experience developing an innovative undergraduate major in contemplative studies at Brown University, which began in 2014. In his view, contemplative studies shares religious studies’ focus on the historical, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds of the sources studied, but adds to that a particular focus on sources’ contemplative dimensions. In his initiative, students can engage in this contemplative dimension from a humanities-focused angle or a scientific angle, including neuroscience and cognitive science. Roth defines contemplation as “the focusing of attention in a sustained fashion leading to: deepened states of concentration, tranquility, and insight; a broadening of the awareness; and eventually to self-contextualizing experiences that are the basis of other-regarding virtues such as empathy, compassion, and love which provide a crucial foundation for social engagement.” His “Integrative Contemplative Pedagogy” merges a “critical first-person approach” involving actually practicing a particular contemplation in the classroom with third-person “‘objective,’ at-a-distance perspectives” that seek to analyze and contextualize the contemplative practice. Roth acknowledges the concern that many religious studies instructors feel about contemplative pedagogy bordering on proselytizing, but he insists that the “critical spirit and empirical nature” with which students practice contemplation mitigates against it being an attempt to indoctrinate students into the contemplative traditions they try out in his classes. In his words, teaching contemplative practices does not conflict with being in a secular university context because “the need to believe is removed.” To argue for the value of contemplative pedagogy, he invokes the call by William James in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) that “the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will.”

Michael Sheehy’s “Teaching Contemplation in 3D” directs us to conceive of contemplation as participating “in critical and creative thinking about the primacy of subjectivity.” Sheehy associates religious studies with “the modern theoretical project of objectifying the world of experience,” at the expense of subjective experience. He seeks to turn this value system on its head, privileging first-person forms of inquiry that “enable students to gain an observable distance from their own internal experiences and investigate previously unexamined assumptions and potential biases.” Particularly noteworthy is Sheehy’s clarification that contemplation is not only an interior-oriented attentiveness, but rather is also pro-social, intersubjective, and dialogical. Sheehy categorizes contemplation as “a performative range that cultivates cognitive, affective, and somatic experiences.” He outlines three

dimensions to contemplative pedagogy, including reflection, contextualization, and transformation, while giving examples of how instructors can operationalize these dimensions in contemplation-oriented classrooms.

Judith Simmer-Brown brings her many years of contemplative-education experience at Naropa University to bear in “Reading with a Fresh Mind: Contemplative Reading Exercise.” Simmer-Brown generously offers us a twelve-part description of how to perform a contemplative reading of a text, which includes enough detail that we can try out her method. Simmer-Brown explains that “what distinguishes contemplative education from just ‘good teaching’ is the strategic focus on the development of ‘first-person inquiry,’ that brings personal experience and inner wisdom into the learning process.” She articulates contemplative education as “a disciplined process of returning the attention to the passage of text, dropping immediate notions of what is meant.” This is more than navel gazing; it is cultivating in students a “cognizance of their most deeply held opinions, habits, and views that contrast with their present-moment wisdom.” Simmer-Brown argues that first-person inquiry is not a stand-alone approach, but rather should be integrated with more dialogical second-person forms of inquiry, and also with the third-person inquiry that is “the bread and butter of university pedagogy.” By emphasizing first-person inquiry, Simmer-Brown seeks to correct what she views as an overemphasis in religious studies on “objective” conceptual analysis in an effort to distinguish the academic study of religion from confessional religious practice. Simmer-Brown points out the irony that students often seek mindfulness training far away from the religious studies scholars who may be better equipped to provide relevant historical and cultural contextualization for these practices. She seeks to re-join contemplative techniques with the study of religion, among other academic pursuits, in an effort to “cultivate a dynamic, non-consumer relationship with what we read,” and thereby to make education transformative.

Contemplative studies is a dynamic and burgeoning field across the university, and it has the potential to significantly impact how we teach religious studies as well as how we conceptualize its disciplinary boundaries. The contributors to this issue give us a taste of the teaching methods and rationales associated with contemplative pedagogy, as well as the broader dilemmas that arise when bringing contemplative pedagogy to religious studies.

#### Resources

Komjathy, Louis. *Introducing Contemplative Studies*. Hoboken, New Jersey: Wiley Blackwell, 2018.

## Why I Do *Not* Use Contemplative Pedagogy in the Public University Classroom

Candy Gunther Brown, Indiana University

Contemplative pedagogy is a broad field. When I use the term, I am thinking particularly of approaches to teaching and learning that encourage participation in “critical first-person,” “experiential,” “introspective” exercises, many of which are derived from religious or spiritual traditions, though they are sometimes reframed as secular.

I teach in a religious studies department at a public university that serves students from diverse cultural and religious backgrounds. I regularly teach students *about* contemplative practices—including mindfulness meditation and yoga as well as prayer and devotional Bible reading—but I do not ask students to *perform* religious or “secularized” versions of any of these practices.

This essay articulates ethical and legal reasons for preserving the distinction between teaching about and encouraging performance of contemplative practices.

### What I Do and Do *Not* Teach Concerning Contemplative Practices

I share with advocates of contemplative pedagogy a passion for equipping students to do more than passively absorb new information. I want to empower students to become more active learners who demonstrate skills in reading closely, thinking critically, forging connections with personal experiences and values while communicating respect for those with divergent perspectives, conceptualizing and supporting arguments with well-selected evidence and careful analysis, and creatively applying classroom learning to life in their inner and outer worlds.

There are many ways to achieve such learning outcomes. For example, I model close reading of short sections of text, facilitate open-ended discussions, invite students to share cultural artifacts that reflect their personal interests, make it safe to experiment with creative modes of expression, and stage writing assignments to maximize opportunities for reflection and revision.

Many proponents of contemplative pedagogy seek to foreground the student’s subjective experiences, perspectives, and values, and to foster critical investigation of the student’s own interpretive tendencies. Instructors may, however, overestimate the possibility of gaining direct, unmediated access to experience. Contemplative experience is always subject to interpretation, and interpretations are framed by worldviews. Perceptions emerge through interplay of sensory stimuli and suggested

interpretations of experience. Instructors influence *what* students notice and *how* they do so: by means of such simple instructions as to focus on the sound of one's breath without judgment. Even the "present moment" is an elusive ideal that presumes that one's own body and breath should be the center of attention; here and now are the place and time that should be the object of focus; awareness should be nonjudgmental; one should accept both negative and positive experiences without striving for something else; and one should cultivate virtues such as empathy, compassion, kindness, optimism, and happiness. Exhortations to "wake up" and "see things as they are" gloss cultural constructs and favor one set of lenses with which to view and interpret reality (e.g., conceptualized in terms of suffering, no-self, impermanence, nonduality, and interconnection) over another. Believing that one has an unclouded view of reality can justify upholding one culturally particular worldview as superior to others.

I teach university students about mindfulness (among other contemplative practices) in two of my regular course offerings: an introduction to religion in America and an intensive writing research seminar on religion, illness, and healing. In neither course do I encourage or discourage students from engaging in mindfulness exercises. Rather, I use a variety of reading and writing assignments, training in ethnographic and library research, audiovisual resources, and lecture and discussion activities that are designed to provide information, engage interest, and move students from their starting assumptions to a deeper level of knowledge, understanding, and analysis.

My introductory course enrolls between fifty and ninety students. I begin our discussion of mindfulness by asking students to express, on a Likert scale, degree of dis/agreement with two statements: "When I think of 'mindfulness' I think of 'stress reduction,'" and "When I think of 'mindfulness' I think of 'Buddhism.'" These questions typically elicit a lively discussion. Predictably, several students volunteer anecdotes about how they have benefited personally from mindfulness programs. Those students who speak up (and quite a number of them do) generally associate mindfulness with stress-reduction—but not with Buddhism.

After a period of freely flowing discussion, students are intrigued to learn about the influence of Buddhist canonical texts such as the *Satipatthāna Sutta* (*The Discourse on the Establishing of Mindfulness*) in shaping American concepts of mindfulness, and that "right mindfulness" (Pāli *sammā sati*) comprises the seventh aspect of the Noble Eightfold Path to liberation from *dukkha* (which can be translated as suffering or as stress), the fourth of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism. Students are surprised to discover the Buddhist credentials of influential promoters of "secular mindfulness"—which some promoters describe as "skillful means" for mainstreaming the *dharma* or as "stealth Buddhism." Close examination of clinical research reveals gaps between study results and marketing claims, weaknesses in study quality, reports of challenging and/or adverse experiences, and unexpected correlations between participation in secular mindfulness and changes in spiritual experiences and religious affiliations. Comparison of Buddhist and Christian understandings of compassion raises questions about the "universality" of "secular ethics." When students observe videotaped loving-kindness (*mettā*) exercises, they note visual and verbal parallels to prayer, and they reflect on how race and gender function in promotional materials. Considering controversies over public-school mindfulness helps students understand why certain people might resist mandatory mindfulness as a violation of conscience or feel pressured by teachers or peers to participate even if opting-out is permitted.

## Why I Draw the Lines Where I Do

There are, in my opinion, ethical and legal reasons to abstain from encouraging—and certainly from requiring—students to perform contemplative practices, even if “secularized.” My ethical concerns center on respect for cultural and religious diversity as well as informed consent.

Many of the contemplative practices that are commonly employed in educational contexts—such as mindfulness and yoga (or *lectio divina* and labyrinth walking)—have historical and ongoing associations with religion. Regardless of whether these practices *can* be disentangled from religion, empirical correlations between participation in nominally secular versions and religious and spiritual experiences suggest an incomplete separation. Even if an instructor has purely pedagogical rather than religious motives for introducing what she is convinced is a fully secular practice, students may still feel uncomfortable for religious reasons. Some may envision participation as disobedience to the most sacred commandments of their religion: for instance, by bowing to the sun god, Surya, in Sun Salutations (*Sūrya Namaskāra*), or meditating on the creature versus the Creator of body, breath, and everything else.

Reframing religiously derived practices as secular or secularized impedes the transparency and voluntarism that are essential to informed consent. If more instructors provided students with in-depth information about the historical and ongoing associations of practices with religion and the potential for nominally secular versions to produce religious effects—before encouraging students to try the practices—a higher percentage of students might raise religious objections. Although university students are somewhat less vulnerable to indoctrination than younger students, the context of higher education exerts subtle, or not-so-subtle, coercive pressures of its own—since students need excellent grades and strong recommendation letters. Even students who “opt-in” in the sense of choosing to enroll in an elective course based on the course description or syllabus may not have enough of an understanding of the contemplative practices taught to make a genuinely informed decision. Some may discover too late (i.e., after the add/drop deadline) that a requirement—or at least encouragement—of the course takes them into territory with which they do not feel comfortable for reasons of religion and/or conscience.

Promotion of secularized practices also risks cultural appropriation and cultural imperialism. Certain of the foremost promoters of secularized practices are wealthy, non-Hispanic whites who pick and choose which elements to take and adapt from Asian traditions—sometimes denigrating the remainder as cultural and religious “baggage.” Research studies and marketing videos often feature low-income, so-called inner-city African American and Latino males who are portrayed as having more difficulty “self-regulating.” This narrative fails to address structural causes of racism or poverty and overlooks the cultural resources and resiliency of targeted groups—who are, statistically, more religiously active and predominantly Christian than the missionaries for “universal” practices that actually privilege white, middle-class ideals.

Universalist rhetoric foregrounds perspectives of those who select and teach their own favored contemplative practices as valuable for everyone. This universalism is *religious* in the sense of claiming special insight into causes and remedies for ultimate problems: diagnosing what is wrong with the world

and prescribing how it can be righted. Other worldviews imply competing diagnoses and prescriptions: for example, urging remembrance of a better past and hope for a better future, thereby inspiring passionate, sacrificial struggle to transform the present world. Being convinced of the benefits of contemplative practices—based on personal experiences and scientific studies—can lead to inadvertent conflation of religious with universal ideals. Particular practices may appear to be self-evidently good and their underlying assumptions obviously true—rather than culturally conditioned and potentially conflicting with other worldviews.

The First Amendment to the US Constitution protects free exercise of religion and against establishment of religion. The Supreme Court, (most notably in *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp*, 1963), has distinguished between teaching *about* religion and encouraging students to *perform* religious practices. The former is constitutionally permissible; the latter is not—even if students are allowed to “opt-out” of participating—since coercion can be subtle.

United States courts have for decades prohibited public schools from encouraging even voluntary, nonsectarian prayer and Bible reading. Courts have only begun to examine contemplative practices rooted in religious traditions other than Christianity—finding, for instance, in *Malnak v. Yogi* (1979) that Transcendental Meditation violates the establishment clause. My experience serving as an expert on religion in four recent legal challenges (over Ashtanga yoga, Superbrain yoga, Waldorf Methods, and mindfulness meditation) leads me to expect that courts will give heightened scrutiny to more such practices in the years ahead.

### **Recommendation: An Opt-In Model of Informed Consent**

Teaching students *about* contemplative practices is ethically and legally unproblematic and can be pedagogically valuable. However, encouraging students to try contemplative exercises, even if nominally secular and/or employed for purely pedagogical purposes, raises difficult questions.

As I explain elsewhere, subtracting religious language, symbols, and gestures and/or adding scientific framing may not go far enough to secularize practices that are premised upon metaphysical, contested assumptions, values, and worldviews.<sup>1</sup> Secularization may be construed not as subtraction and addition but as radically rebuilding from foundations that make explicit and interrogate—thereby enhancing agency to act without being controlled by—assumptions about self and world. I thus operationalize secularization *as* transparency and voluntarism.

Rather than seek to ban all contemplative practice from educational contexts, I recommend an opt-in model of informed consent. My goal is to respect cultural and religious diversity by upholding the values of transparency and voluntarism. There is a higher barrier to participation in opt-in (active consent) than opt-out (passive consent) programs. This may be frustrating to instructors who want to maximize participation and distribution of benefits. Automatically including students unless they make an active decision to opt-out plays on human inertia, herd instincts, respect for authority, and peer pressure. It

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<sup>1</sup> Candy Gunther Brown, *Debating Yoga and Mindfulness in Public Schools: Reforming Secular Education or Reestablishing Religion?* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2019).

takes thought, time, and effort to make an active decision to opt-in or -out. For these reasons, opt-in programs better facilitate informed consent. Although one-on-one informed consent interviews are resource intensive, they are more effective than literature distribution for ensuring that individuals (in the case of minors, both children and parents) understand whether practices may or may not be appropriate for them, given their personal backgrounds, circumstances, beliefs, values, and goals.

My suggestion to instructors interested in contemplative practices is to first learn as much as they can about specific traditions. If they like what they learn, then there is no reason that they cannot engage in the practices themselves. Public-school instructors (from kindergarten through university levels) can teach their students about the histories and contexts of contemplative traditions, as well as provide information about strengths and weaknesses of scientific evidence concerning risks, benefits, contraindications, and alternatives—without either encouraging or discouraging students to try the practices for themselves. If contemplative pedagogy is employed in public-school contexts, I urge that it be done during noninstructional hours on a voluntary, opt-in basis, following one-on-one informed consent protocols. Instructors at private institutions have more legal latitude, but there are still ethical reasons to facilitate informed consent.

By distinguishing between teaching about and encouraging performance of contemplative practice, pedagogical goals can be achieved without violating ethical or legal standards.

## Resources

“Does Mindfulness Belong in Public Schools?” Two views by Candy Gunther Brown, “NO—with its roots in religious tradition, teaching mindfulness in public schools violates the separation of church and state,” and Saki Santorelli, “YES—mindfulness is a secular practice that benefits students,” *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (Spring 2016): 64–65.

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## Making Reading Relevant: Critical Thinking as Contemplative Practice

Kathleen M. Fisher, Assumption College

“I don’t understand why we have to read these old stories,” the student said. By old, he meant the book of Genesis. He went on: “They don’t make a whole lot of sense and besides, science has proven they’re wrong.” My students regularly struggle with biblical stories, reading them as factually true or false; to them, “myth” means “false.” Such a literalist reading is quite understandable – the Bible is a confounding set of texts! In the past I would try to explain the concepts of metaphors and analogies, or give an overview of the Babylonian Exile as the context for composing the Book of Genesis. I would provide information that I felt sure would reveal the purpose of the text. But my approach was intellectually incomplete; I needed to engage their minds more broadly to teach them about myths.

Thanks to an AAR/Luce Seminar on Theologies of Religious Pluralism and Comparative Theology, I learned the ancient practice of the dialogic study of the Talmud. In a traditional study pairing called a *havruta*, readers enter into dialogue with the text and with each other, constructing meaning by identifying multiple interpretations. It is a model of analytical thought and communal debate that some have argued is at the heart of Jewish identity. Since I use this method most often with biblical texts I call it “Torah Study.”

### Slowing Down

Torah Study requires slow, careful line-by-line reading, stopping regularly to paraphrase, question, discuss, and puzzle over specific words, phrases, and verses. The goal is not to make it through the entire reading—that may indicate you’ve gone too fast—but to study its words and images with a finely tuned attention and uncover the story’s many layers. Torah Study embraces the ambiguities and gaps common in biblical texts to show that multiple, even conflicting, interpretations can coexist.

In the course “Faith and Reason,” I teach Genesis 1 and 2 through Torah Study. In pairs with step-by-step written instructions, students take turns reading one of the chapters aloud, noticing how the passage sounds compared to silent reading. They pause every two or three lines and restate the verses in their own words. They look up unfamiliar words (cell phones make good dictionaries!), ask questions, and suggest answers. Periodically they stop to make a few notes on the passage which frequently starts to reveal the text’s ambiguities and mysteries. I encourage students to offer interpretations that might fill in these gaps and to welcome disagreement rather than seek consensus. As I listened in on a recent

Torah Study, I heard students familiar with the story identifying details they simply hadn't noticed before. The first-time readers were raising new questions that challenged conventional or clichéd exegesis.

After about twenty minutes of paired conversation, I opened class discussion, asking "What was it like to read in this way?" Students jumped straight into the stories describing specific details discovered in the first halves of their passages; to my surprise, no one had gotten to the end. As for the reading itself, many found the mention of the four rivers in Genesis 2:10–14 especially perplexing. Students began offering their knowledge of Mesopotamian geography and culture which led to imaginative and reasonable interpretations of why the storytellers included these details. That led others to notice a contrast with the water images in Genesis 1. Finally, we ended up deliberating why God made the Garden at all. Was this to please the Creator or the creation? As they talked, I could see students working several options as if building a jigsaw puzzle; but unlike puzzle pieces, they could suggest several plausible ways to fit them together.

A few classes later, one student remarked with some delight, "The story made so much more sense when I *heard* it." Now he prepares for most of his classes by doing the readings aloud. Another student wanted to talk further about who most benefited from the Garden. She hadn't ever thought about this question until reading the passage with someone else and it had "troubled" her view of God.

### **The Problem of Irrelevance**

My purpose in using this close-reading method with students is to change their relationship with books, to teach them, using Ann Burlein's beautiful phrase, "to drink deeply" from them.<sup>1</sup>

I love books. They carry me into someone else's world to take better perspective of my own.

My students don't love books so much. For many, a book is just a minefield waiting to trip them up with incomprehensible words and arcane facts. Books are boring, they tell me, and reading is usually a painful slog through too many pages of inconsequential ideas. Books don't carry them away to other worlds, so as to comfort or enlighten them.

Certainly, it's hard to love a book if you struggle to read. Learning disabilities and myriad mental distractions can quickly take the joy right out of it. But what my students seem to dislike most is the feeling of irrelevance. More than once they've told me how they'll never use what they read for class, so they only like to read books that relate to their lives. The relevance of the ancient biblical stories for contemporary life is particularly mysterious, and not just for undergraduates.

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<sup>1</sup> Ann Burlein, "Learning to Drink Deeply from Books: Using Experiential Assignments to Teach Concepts," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 14, no. 2 (April 2011): 137–55.

My students read under duress. So, what could I do to help them find books more inviting than irrelevant, more animating than aggravating? How could I change their relationship to reading so that it would bring more comfort than confusion, be more solace than slog?

Advocates of contemplative education are especially attuned to the problem of irrelevance and claim that it arises, in part, from the academy's preoccupation with critical thinking skills. They rightfully note that students are not just "brains on a stick;" they come to class with hearts and souls and life experiences, too. But, say critics, education increasingly attends only to the mind with little or no regard for the rest of the learner. Academic work then seems out of touch with the rest of life. When Barbara Walvoord examined introductory religion courses, for example, she noticed a great divide between students' desire to explore life's big questions and professors' intellectual expectations. The emphasis on critical thinking often alienated students from the subject matter by trying to separate thought from feeling, theory from experience.<sup>2</sup>

As a professor who lives largely and happily in her head, I felt a strong desire to defend the value of critical thinking and to rehabilitate the impression of knowledge as a distraction from wisdom. I, too, want to teach the "whole" student, mind, heart, and soul. But in my approach, critical analysis is a means, not an obstacle, to that end. The problem, in my view, is not in thinking too much; it's in thinking too narrowly. To put it another way, critical thinking is much more than mastering abstract concepts.

The truth is I think with and about my *whole* self—my experiences, ideas, sensations, and emotions. Thought is part of my inner life, taking me deeply into questions of meaning, and books have long been my travelling companions. When I read "critically," I develop the same faculties as the contemplative practices of meditation or mindfulness. I become focused and attentive to details and more open to multiple possibilities or theories.

When I ask students to do a Torah Study exercise, I invite them to enter the story with head and heart, analysis and reflection. Through attentive reading, they can stand in the shoes of other characters, making room for a different experience alongside their own. Their worlds get a little bigger. They do not accumulate "knowledge" as much as they learn how "to know." And rather than struggle alone to understand, they partner with others and together navigate the dark corners of a passage.

### **Contemplative Thinking**

The more I use this reading pedagogy, the more I am persuaded that it blends the best intentions of critical thinking and contemplative practice. Requiring both cognitive skill and personal engagement, Torah Study gives students a direct experience of the passage in an analytical and dialogical way. Together they grapple with challenging vocabulary and syntax, unfamiliar images and references, and layers of meaning. My students' discussion of Genesis suggests that their experience of patient, critical,

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<sup>2</sup> Barbara Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2008).

communal reading made them more curious than anxious and deepened their interest in, if not their understanding of, the text.

But here I must also admit to some unease in appropriating a pedagogy originally meant for religious texts. Though not a devotional practice, like the prayerful reading of scripture called *lectio divina* (“Divine Reading”), this method is rooted in a specific faith community. This is, perhaps, not a major problem in a theology course because the content and experience are relevant to the discipline. But my colleagues in English or history, or at public institutions, would not be able to use this pedagogy without minimizing or stripping it of its religious context.

I use Torah Study to teach students the centrality of scripture in several religious traditions *and* to sharpen their reading skills. There is no reason for me to ignore its religious history and to do so would, in my view, be misleading and irresponsible. But I teach in a Catholic college, not a Jewish seminary. As a Christian scholar, I must acknowledge my status as an outsider to Judaism. I worry that using a Jewish approach to the Word of God to develop cognitive skills could be disrespectful or insensitive to the deepest issues of religious meaning and identity.

Nevertheless, I think this method of close reading does more good than harm to my students. In a modest way it responds to the need for relevance, marrying the benefits of critical analysis to the desire for meaning and self-knowledge. In Torah Study, communal reading makes stories personal and encourages students to share their questions and confusions with others. Critical thinking allows them to explore those questions more deeply and thoroughly and, ultimately, to decide what the stories mean for their lives. And this is why I hope they will come to love books.

## Resources

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## Contemplating the Smartphone Dis/Connect

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Since the first iPhone was introduced in 2007, smartphones have become not only ubiquitous, but a near constant in our waking environment. Even when we are not on our own device, several people around us usually are, which often compels us to check our own. This is sufficient to demonstrate that their effect on us as individuals, whether attentional, psychological, or physiological, is determined not only by our own device and usage but by that of others around us as well.

While we may have some sense of how our lives have become more and more lived through our devices, we rarely take a moment to more closely consider the range of impacts they exert on the psychology and general quality of our experience. Some are predominantly innocuous if not amusing: most users report “phantom vibrations,” thinking that a notification has arrived only to reach for their smartphone and discover that there is none.<sup>1</sup> Other impacts may be fatally literal, such as texting and driving (or even walking) in which our affinity for multitasking proves itself to be a high-risk misnomer<sup>2</sup>: studies show that not only do most multitaskers perform worse on both tasks, they tend to believe that they have actually performed better!<sup>3</sup>

While many educators express concern about our “digital native” students, who are defined by Gazzaley and Rosen in *The Distracted Mind* as those “who eagerly embrace attention-grabbing technologies without taking the time to recognize and appreciate how they might best engage with them,”<sup>4</sup> I would suggest that few among us, regardless of when we were born, have more deliberately explored the maladaptive behaviors of our technology usage and consistently applied alternatives to remedy them.

Among many other enriching applications, contemplative pedagogy offers a unique opportunity to help students (and ourselves) become cognizant digital citizens, gaining insight into the subtle impacts, blind

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<sup>1</sup> Vera J. Sauer et al., “The Phantom in My Pocket,” *Mobile Media and Communication* 3, no. 3 (September 2015): 293–316. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/2050157914562656>

<sup>2</sup> Adam Gorlick, “Media multitaskers pay mental price, Stanford study shows,” *Stanford News*, August 24, 2009, <https://news.stanford.edu/2009/08/24/multitask-research-study-082409/>.

<sup>3</sup> L. Mark Carrier et al., “Multitasking across Generations: Multitasking Choices and Difficulty in Three Generations of Americans,” *Computers in Human Behavior* 25, no. 2 (March 2009): 483–489. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2008.10.012>. Also available at [http://www5.csudh.edu/psych/Multitasking\\_Across\\_Generations\\_Carrier\\_Rosen\\_Cheever\\_Benitez\\_Chang\\_2009.pdf](http://www5.csudh.edu/psych/Multitasking_Across_Generations_Carrier_Rosen_Cheever_Benitez_Chang_2009.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> Adam Gazzaley and Larry D. Rosen, *The Distracted Mind: Ancient Brains in a High-Tech World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2016), 144.

spots, and mistaken beliefs of our technology usage by directing our attention to them in a focused, well-structured learning environment. In this essay, I present the first of a series of “Smartphone Dis/Connect” exercises as a means to not only introduce contemplative pedagogy more generally, but also its specific application towards an especially poignant, stubborn, and potentially dangerous target. While a range of contemplative exercises are needed to focus on each impact, the symptom I wish to address here, and one in which a contemplative exercise proves immediately illuminating, is anxiety.

Smartphones remain so new that extended studies on their long-term usage are not yet available, but the initial waves of research are deeply concerning, especially with regard to the children and adolescents who are our future students. Even if we are not “that kind of doctor,” anyone who works with undergrads is not at all surprised to learn that anxiety recently surpassed depression as the most commonly diagnosed mental health disorder among college students.<sup>5</sup> The human brain evolved over tens of millions of years to become the preeminent information processor in existence; over the course of a decade, some of its core functions have been superseded by a device that not only provides nearly instantaneous access to an inconceivable range of information, but also is designed to draw the brain’s attentional systems away from more immediate tasks and more important goals. In what is now abbreviated as FOMO (Fear Of Missing Out), alerts and notifications trigger the fight-or-flight stress response in the mind, body, and brain<sup>6</sup>; this may not be as pronounced as when provoked by the proximity of an actual predator, but alerts indeed initiate the same physiological processes, with quantifiable and subjectively observable symptoms. Functioning as “brain hacks” by design, alerts may be unleashed in a calculated barrage to hijack our attention away from competing stimuli, whether analog or digital, and regardless of whether the “threat” is real, imagined, or merely a deliberately coded deception to increase our screen time.<sup>7</sup>

So what is contemplative pedagogy? And how can it be applied not only to instruct students about the lived consequences of their technology usage but also help them to make real changes to their behavior?

### **Key Perspectives in Contemplative Pedagogy**

We know that contemplation has been employed as an educational component since ancient Greece, and yet it remains nascent as a distinctive pedagogy in the modern academy. Among its most distinguishing (and, according to Louis Komjathy, “subversive”) features is its high valuation of first-person content and discourse: students explore their own subjective experience as a legitimate object of critical inquiry. Attentional meditation training with meta-awareness empowers the subject to defuse their mind from mental content; that is, students observe thoughts with a sense of separation, thereby empowering a clearer cognizance and evaluation of that content rather than automatically and

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<sup>5</sup> Center for Collegiate Mental Health, 2015 Annual Report. January 2016, [https://ccmh.psu.edu/files/2017/10/2015\\_CCMH\\_Report\\_1-18-2015-yq3vik.pdf](https://ccmh.psu.edu/files/2017/10/2015_CCMH_Report_1-18-2015-yq3vik.pdf).

<sup>6</sup> Angie Marcos, “Are You Addicted to Your Smartphone?” The California State University System News, April 26, 2017, <https://www2.calstate.edu/csu-system/news/Pages/are-you-addicted-to-your-smartphone.aspx>.

<sup>7</sup> “What is Brain Hacking? Tech Insiders on Why You Should Care,” *60 Minutes*, CBS News, June 11, 2017, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/what-is-brain-hacking-tech-insiders-on-why-you-should-care/>.

uncritically identifying with it. Contemplative pedagogy acknowledges the fact that total objectivity with regard to our internal machinations is impossible—but it likewise asserts that this is no less true of the lens through which we perceive the normative, “third-person” textual sources that dominate our syllabi. The latter remain essential but are no longer privileged, and empirical content becomes equally and uniquely relevant for an inquiry into the nature of self, phenomena, and our lived experience as human beings.

In addition to first- and third-person modes of content, contemplative pedagogy employs second-person approaches to underscore and enhance the value of dialogical interaction, not only in the inherently hierarchical relationship between an educator and their students, but especially peer-to-peer. An ascendant feature of technological disconnection is the fear and avoidance of direct, face-to-face interaction with our fellow human beings, so contemplative pedagogy seeks to address this concern by inviting further opportunities for dialogue and relationship-building in the classroom.

Although third-person content and second-person dialogue is of course quite standard, this rubric highlights the inclusion of first-person perspectives as definitive of contemplative pedagogy, as has been articulated and advocated by Harold D. Roth of Brown University. More recently, Roth has introduced a fourth category of “no-person perspective,” which signifies numinous experience transcending self-identification and self-reference. That is, subject-object duality dissolves in the absolute immediacy of the present moment. While this merits its own discussion, “zero-person perspectives” are neither applied in the present exercise nor listed among its objectives. As such, the remainder of this essay focuses on the integration of first-, second-, and third-person content to acutely explore how anxiety is provoked by our smartphone usage.

### **Contemplative Practice as Teaching Strategy**

You are welcome to download and print the complete “Smartphone Dis/Connect: FOMO” contemplative exercise,<sup>8</sup> which is designed as a single printout to be read aloud by the educator and distributed to every student as a worksheet.

By way of introduction, this exercise employs contemplative pedagogy to personally explore how smartphones provoke anxiety right now in this moment, and to more deliberately consider how this affects our experience more generally, whether we are on the phone or off. While some of these techniques are drawn from contemplative religious traditions, and in this case Buddhism especially, there is nothing inherently religious or philosophical about its focal objects or objectives; this exercise simply employs the concentrative faculty of mind to pay close attention to experience. Both contemplative pedagogy and contemplative studies celebrate interdisciplinary dialogue, as between religious studies, psychology, and communication in the present discussion; individual disciplines are enriched through the inclusion and exploration of diverse perspectives on a single topic.

The total structure of the exercise is straightforward: it proceeds through a narrative introduction and guided contemplation session, and then concludes with written and/or dialogical reflections. The

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<sup>8</sup> See appendix, p. 49

duration of each section can be adjusted depending on how much time is available, but I would suggest no less than ten minutes for the introduction and guided meditation itself, as students need to settle in, attune to the environment created by the exercise, and investigate their subtle reactions to it.

Ideally the educator will have some familiarity with basic attentional meditation, but anyone can proceed by mindfully reading through the exercise while simultaneously engaging the contemplative foci as directed in the narrative. In this the educator is a full participant and thus equally prepared to participate in a conversation about the experience, sharing their own observations. As always it is best to gain familiarity with content before teaching it, so an educator should complete the exercise and gain some insight into it themselves before leading a class.

It begins with simple attentional meditation on the breath, then the main section relies on a technique more akin to “open monitoring” or “open awareness” practice.<sup>9</sup> In this the breath functions as a centering anchor of attentional focus while awareness relaxes and expands, incorporating the range of internal and external experiences as they arise and cease in each moment. Rather than labeling anything but the breath as a distraction, the full content of experience becomes the focal object of contemplation. Concentration maintains a degree of stability and continuity by retaining a sense of the present and relinquishing discursive thought processes that obscure or ignore the acute phenomena of the waking state for the meandering diffusion of daydream. This is no easy task, but students are only asked to try contemplative “practice” rather than somehow perfect it. Following the narrative and returning attention to the designated foci as best they can, such genuine engagement with the exercise is sufficient to gain insight. This *is* good practice.

To this point, the exercise is fairly standard in contemplative terms as it sets the ground for greater cognizance of experience. It shifts when students are asked to slowly and deliberately take out their devices and watch whatever feelings arise as they light the screen and encounter the information displayed upon it. As they proceed, they are reminded to keep breathing deeply and retain a sense of the breath. Having mindfully engaged that sequence, students are asked to open the settings on their devices, turn on all alerts and notifications for all apps, and set the volume to full blast. Then—and this is key—the device must be placed out of reach: under their seats if in a standard classroom or pushed an arm’s-length away when sitting on the floor. The impulse to silence (and check) incoming notifications is remarkably powerful, especially when surrounded by peers in a context that ordinarily forbids it, so devices must be out of reach, and students must be reminded to keep their hands in their laps.

Depending on the size of the class, a digital cacophony of alerts and notifications will arise almost immediately. And we all have to simply listen in total stillness, breathing while watching and thus enduring with cognizance the range of tightly restrained impulses, reactive hopes and fears, and stress-induced physical symptoms such as muscle tension and perspiration. This is a somewhat hellish but not

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<sup>9</sup> Cortland J. Dahl, Antoine Lutz, and Richard J. Davidson, “Reconstructing and Deconstructing the Self: Cognitive Mechanisms in Meditation Practice,” *Trends in Cognitive Science* 19, no. 9 (September 2015): 515–523. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2015.07.001>. Available without paywall at <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4595910/>.

intolerable or unamusing experience, especially since it tends to inspire a strong sense of camaraderie by suffering through it together, which aids enthusiasm, candidness, and authenticity in discussion later.

Once the more meditative section concludes, students are instructed to retrieve their devices, set them to “airplane mode” such that no more alerts can arise, return them to their bags, and then respond to three sets of reflective questions on the second side of the sheet, which help students clarify and crystallize their physical, conceptual, and emotional responses to smartphone alerts respectively. Depending on time and preference, these can be explored silently in writing, in partnered or small group discussions, in dialogue with the entire class, or some combination thereof. Following the exploration of these impacts, the last question asks students to consider how they might skillfully adjust their smartphone usage, which should be pursued in a full-room discussion such that creative solutions may be shared with and further refined by the entire class collectively.

### Conclusions and Extensions

In perusing aggregated research discussions on the impacts of technology usage, such as *The Distracted Mind*, my first impulse is to lock my iPhone in a drawer whenever possible—but such an action only addresses my own usage. In so many ways the public environment remains dominated by them. Even if our own device is out of sight, someone else’s almost always is—and then not even ours is fully out of mind. Smartphones are not going away, at least not until they are superseded by new technologies that will likely be ever more deeply integrated. While we seemed to have been doing just fine a decade ago without all these apps, we have to admit that some are quite useful now, so we must resolve to be more deliberate about their use<sup>10</sup> such that a more generalized anxiety, among other negative impacts, does not reach epidemic proportions due in part to their prevalence. Only time will tell whether anxiety already has reached this level among Digital Natives.

To help mitigate this possibility (or reality), it is reassuring to recognize that, as educators, we are empowered to exert a high degree of control over the learning environments we create for our students. In my experience, the consistent application of contemplative pedagogy within them adds not only a distinct potency, but also a strong sense of community by forcing students off their devices and back into direct dialogue with each other regardless of whether class has begun or not. “Back in the day” we might have tried concealing ourselves behind a book or losing ourselves in doodling or whatever when feeling awkward in confined public spaces; these days students are almost constantly absorbed in their devices, and the depth of separation from their present environment and immediate peers is far more total.

Regardless of the course content, such absorption in distraction inspires the deployment of structures derived from contemplative pedagogy, and more specifically what I have learned through my own contemplative practice. For one, I ban devices of any kind at any time in my classrooms (except by vetted accommodation), whether class has begun or not, and whether I am there or not. Admittedly, this temporarily expels a scattering of digital castaways to continue their swiping outside the room

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<sup>10</sup> See Tristan Harris’s blog post, “Distracted in 2016? Reboot Your Phone with Mindfulness,” January 27, 2016, <http://www.tristanharris.com/2016/01/distracted-in-2016-welcome-to-mindfulness-bootcamp-for-your-iphone/>.

before class, but a much larger group enjoys conversation within, such that the learning space becomes vibrant and alive rather than deadened by the dull taps of disconnection. This vibrancy is especially pronounced in classes where contemplative exercises are offered daily; students steadily build relationships by dialoguing about content that is inherently personal and thereby establish genuine friendships by means of it.

When teaching religious traditions to undergrads especially, so much of their interest is inspired by larger questions about the nature of self and the sacred, about ethical values and existential meaning. This is what drew me to the discipline as an undergrad and to the profession as an adult. College is such a potent time for self-exploration, -discovery, and -definition. For the field of religious studies especially, and for the humanities in higher education more generally, the application of contemplative pedagogy can serve as a unique resource that extends well beyond the relevance of the discipline as an allegedly post-subjective, third-person field of inquiry. In these exercises emphasizing the value of one's own experience as human beings, students find a deeper relevance precisely because their discoveries are personal and subjective, and because they are encouraged to explore their own beliefs and perspectives while appreciating and respecting the fact that others see things differently. In this, contemplative pedagogy teaches a genuine pluralism that openly engages diversity and difference. Moreover, it directly addresses a driving interest of our students and thus a primary responsibility of our teaching religious studies in the first place.

## Resources

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## Critical, Creative, Contemplative

Karolyn Kinane, University of Virginia

“I no longer read for fun.” “I can’t enjoy movies anymore.” “Reading a menu at a restaurant, I start analyzing its rhetoric and can’t think about what to order.” These and similar comments from students across the humanities got me thinking: Students are—even unintentionally—applying critical-reading skills that we practice within courses to life beyond class. But are those skills enough? Are they helping students to flourish as humans? In order to complement critical thinking, about a decade ago, I started incorporating a different set of practices into my courses, drawn from contemplative traditions and the then-emerging field of contemplative pedagogy.

Contemplative pedagogy is an approach to teaching that uses the notion of “practice” to attend to the inner-world of students. This means we use practice to: notice existing cognitive, affective, and somatic habits; bring critical reflection to bear upon them; move toward course material, fellow students, and our larger communities with the awareness that arises from practice. By working with students on their capacities to direct their attention and emotionally regulate, many contemplative instructors aim to build students’ sense of agency and resiliency—to encourage their flourishing as individuals who can in turn build humane communities.

Contemplative practices such as deep listening, journaling, meditation, etc., offer students the opportunity to “be with what arises” rather than grasping for outcomes, leaping to judgments, or otherwise reacting from habitual ways of being. “Practices” have a clear beginning and end. One does not multitask while practicing. Some contemplative instructors choose simply to begin and end class time with a moment of silence wherein students are invited to gather their attention and notice how they are feeling. Other instructors weave practices throughout their courses in the form of exercises, activities, assignments, and even evaluations, thereby developing students’ capacities for contemplative inquiry across domains.

For many, key to contemplative pedagogy are “first-person critical approaches,” which allow the practice to become the object of inquiry. That is, students bring critical faculties to bear upon the content of “what arises” for them during their practice.

In my senior seminar “Mysticism and Contemplation,” a course that explores texts from a variety of religious traditions and secular contexts across thousands of years, students engage in a four-stage

process that I describe as a contemplative reading practice.<sup>1</sup> Their weekly preparation requires that they 1) notice cognitive, somatic, or affective responses that arise during reading. Students may notice that they are bored, confused, annoyed, tense, or delighted by what they read. The assignment then requires students to 2) pause and explore those reactions/responses. I encourage students to “own” their emotional reactions rather than project them on to the text. Students’ subjective, “first-person” experiences become the object of “critical” analysis.

For example, through analysis, students have observed that they are annoyed because they are detecting misogyny in the text, and that they are confused by the idea of one-ness because their sense of individual identity is so strong that they can’t imagine any other way of being. Then, in detail, students have explored their relationships to misogyny, or individual identity, or whatever else has arisen. And so, students have subjective, *first-person* experiences of noticing their emotions as they read a difficult text and then subject those experience to *critical* inquiry. This practice involves much more than stating how a text makes us feel. It is a process of noticing the projections, expectations, and cultural norms that we bring to a text so that we may turn towards that text with more presence and attention to *what else* it has to say.

It sometimes takes a few tries before students “get” this part. For example, students have expressed hesitation at “going off on a tangent” about their own life experiences, or they think I don’t want their “manifesto” diagnosing the ills of society. I have to encourage students that, yes, taking space to articulate your own experiences and beliefs that give rise to feeling is absolutely necessary and productive to the process.

Students then 3) return to the text to examine its content, rhetoric, and contexts, which is the more familiar, third-person, critical part of their weekly preparation that I won’t discuss here.

In the final part of the assignment, students 4) reflect upon what this text may have to teach about its *topic*. Students consider: what may you learn about joy, suffering, duality, immanence, transcendence, nature—whatever the topic—through engagement with this text? What wisdom may you carry forward as a result of exploring your own expectations and projections, the words of the text themselves, and its contexts?

I have found that this final step, which is the truly transformative moment, could only be achieved once students had engaged in both critical *and* contemplative reading—when they had the opportunity to approach a text with curiosity and humility cultivated by contemplative practices. Rather than reifying students’ existing beliefs and expectations about their own values and those of others—as had happened in previous iterations of this course—this four-part reading practice successfully allows for a deep engagement with the self and other wherein the experiencer walks away a little different than when they started.

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<sup>1</sup> Karolyn Kinane, “Contemplative Reading: Some Definitions and Examples,” *College Contemplative*, April 8, 2018, <https://collegecontemplative.wordpress.com/2018/04/08/contemplative-reading-some-definitions-and-examples/>.

In course evaluations, students note how “challenging” this exercise is. But it is challenging for all different kinds of reasons. Some students aren’t used to writing about themselves. Others describe it as “training a muscle” they hadn’t used before. One student described the slow and steady “falling away of resistance” towards different ways of thinking that this process provoked over the semester, even if their own beliefs about a topic did not change.

Contemplative reading, as practiced by St. Augustine, among others, sprung from an essential faith in a text’s capacity to have meaning. I ask my students to bring that hermeneutic of faith to texts, if even just for a little while, before returning back to the more familiar hermeneutic of suspicion.<sup>2</sup>

Contemplative reading and writing complement critical thinking and reading. Unlike critique, when we read contemplatively, we seek connection, communion, and understanding. We step into another person’s shoes and perspectives to better understand them and ourselves. Contemplative reading and writing practices encourage us to explore our deeply held values, biases, and preferences so that we can move through and with them into compassionate engagement with the other—be it a text, person, situation, or idea.

Often, when we read critically, we are suspicious of the text or wary of what it is trying to say to us. We critique it, dissect it, and analyze it to find where we agree or disagree with its ideas and why. Critical thinking and critical reading practices are essential for helping us become independent thinkers, for helping us discern rhetorical strategies so we may become informed and responsible citizens able to make our own choices about what is right and wrong, true or false, good or bad.

Contemplative, critical, and creative are complementary dispositions that students can develop to serve a variety of contexts. One should not replace the other. Rather, our pedagogies should help students to discern which attitude or approach is called for in a particular situation and empower them to enact it. In this assignment, students adopt each of these dispositions. They practice noticing their reactions and exploring them; approaching a text with some critical awareness of their emotional reactivity; analyzing the text’s rhetorical content and historical contexts; contemplating the text’s impact upon them and its message; creating meaning from the interaction.

Religious studies seems both an ideal and fraught place for contemplative pedagogy. On the one hand, the content of the field includes centuries of wisdom on what it means to be human, how to deal with suffering and joy, and how to explore the relationships among such ideas as the inner and outer worlds, contemplation and action, individual and community. Such content, I have found, evokes strong, visceral responses in students, particularly when that content is mined for insight into human experience. These features provide fertile ground for contemplative inquiry wherein one learns about the self and the other and is transformed by the interaction.

On the other hand, some of our colleagues in other disciplines already suspect religious studies of proselytizing; contemplative pedagogy could be seen as a covert means to do just that. For example, instructors themselves may favor particular ways of understanding the complexities of the human

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<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. D. Savage (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1970).

condition and, rather than allowing space for exploration of questions of meaning, they unwittingly steer students to adopt that worldview. Additionally, some instructors may blur the church/state line in the ways they invite students to “try on” or “practice” devotional modes from various religions. Further, some instructors may perpetuate colonizer-mentality and cultural misappropriation through unskillful application of contemplative practices drawn from various religious traditions. And, as in any discipline, there is the danger of a charismatic instructor becoming a guru or a caring instructor becoming a therapist.

When considering adopting contemplative pedagogy, instructors may want to reflect deeply upon their own practice-commitment and their aim of transformation. I would encourage instructors to ask themselves: How does my own contemplative practice inform my teaching? What is it that I hope is “transformed” through engagement with course material? What opportunities do students have to draw from their own backgrounds? To what use is that experience put? How do students position themselves in relationship to contemplative practices from a variety of traditions? Consistently and honestly working with these questions privately and in community can help instructors to establish integrity in the process and to open themselves to the possibility of their own transformation.

Just as we ask students to engage in critical exploration of personal experience, as instructors we must identify biases and contexts that shape our own course design. I would encourage instructors to subject their teaching experiences, assumptions, and habits, as well as their contemplative practices, to this mode of inquiry with some regularity. This process, paired with third-person ways of knowing (scholarly study) can clarify desires, drives, ontological beliefs, and epistemological processes that shape the course goals and student experiences.

The habits we practice in the classroom shape our behaviors beyond those walls. Let us inquire: how humane are our current pedagogical habits and practices? I believe that instructors cannot continue to place more importance on the content of our field than the humans before us.<sup>3</sup> Disciplines are merely ways of making meaning, and we should not confuse them with meaning itself.<sup>4</sup> At the University of Virginia Contemplative Sciences Center, I work with faculty across colleges to reorient not just individual courses but whole disciplines towards decolonizing our educational spaces and advancing human flourishing.

## Resources

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<sup>3</sup> Karolyn Kinane, “Contemplative Pedagogy, Enchantment, and the Medieval Past,” in Forum IV: (Inter)Disciplinary Medievalist Pedagogy, *Postmedieval Forum*, October 2013, <https://postmedieval-forum.com/forums/forum-iv-pedagogy/contemplative-pedagogy-karolyn-kinane/>.

<sup>4</sup> Karolyn Kinane, “Handout for Faculty Workshop,” *College Contemplative*, November 30, 2012, <https://collegecontemplative.wordpress.com/2012/11/30/handout-for-faculty-workshop/>.

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## **Simplicity: Portals to the Contemplative**

Anne Carolyn Klein, Rice University

### **Me and My Background**

I teach undergraduate and graduate students in the area of Buddhism. I also teach Buddhist practice outside the academy. Buddhist literature and philosophy is in many ways a natural context in which to take advantage of the current interest and growing refinement of contemplative studies in higher education. Yet, because of the academy's interestingly complex relationship with religion, especially in a Department of Religion, I have also often felt reluctant to teach meditation in courses precisely because they do focus on Buddhist traditions.

My scholarly training in texts and language, which began at University of Wisconsin–Madison and continued at the University of Virginia, also involved many years of either living with or ongoing consultation with Tibetan masters from India, Nepal, and Tibet. All of these mentors were highly accomplished scholars and practitioners. With almost all of them, both in and out of the academy, I studied texts as well as practices. Indeed, for me as a scholar and practitioner, one of the most compelling things about Buddhism, and especially the Tibetan traditions on which I focus, is the way they seamlessly interweave different elements of human intelligence and creativity. The intellectual element is very strong and typically in service of these other elements, not a replacement for them.

For the last thirty years I have taught in the Department of Religion at Rice University in Houston, Texas. Our graduate program has an optional track in contemplative studies. For graduate students, this means paying attention to the contemplative side of the material they are reading or translating. For undergraduates, although they might also do this in their papers, my emphasis is on calling attention to capacities that can be thematized cognitively, but are most compelling when one touches into them somatically or experientially.

### **Lived Experience**

I like to emphasize that traditional meditation systems, including Buddhist ones, also offer training in areas of natural human competency. Everyone—secular, spiritual, or religious—has an innate capacity to further qualities such as attention, imagination, personal aspiration, and to incorporate an aesthetic sensibility that heightens any of these. In distilling scholarly and contemplative material sourced in Buddhist traditions, especially Tibetan traditions, I am committed to making it clear to students that they are not simply intellects, but have other natural capacities as well that do not negate the intellect but offer different areas of knowing. Jes Betlesen has written about these competencies in a culturally

expansive manner in his Gateways cited below. I believe this clarification of skills not accounted for in our appreciation of intellectual discernment is the most important element to emphasize in a general contemplative studies orientation. It can be hard to hold a middle ground here. This is not a nonintellectual position. It does, however, stand to put intellectual capacity in a new context, and on a different but equal footing with other types of capacities. The contemplative arena is not the only way to bring this distinction home, but it is a powerful method. It is a way of actually engaging these capacities, so the knowing is direct, not theoretical.

What links this orientation with the traditional Buddhist material I also teach is the emphasis on what some call lived experience, or what Eugene Gendlin calls the felt sense. Simply put, it means being in touch with what is going on in your own mind and body at a particular moment. This is simple enough. But it is challenging given the tendency (for almost everyone) to go into a story, judgment, or theory about what is occurring. In focusing on this relatively static *what*, we inevitably move away from the simple sensing of it. Or, to put this another way, we move from noticing how it feels to what I think. This move shifts the very core of our sense of identity. Are you a *what* or a *how*? Are you a static identity or are you a process? And what difference does that make? These are the kinds of questions a contemplative orientation can illuminate.

For anyone new to this process, and even with some experience under your belt, it is a challenge to recognize that whatever you are experiencing can be a valuable area of exploration. There is a habit of dismissal that can be hard to catch. And very revealing when one does.

In this regard, the ability to discriminate between thinking and feeling is a crucial and fundamental element of a contemplative education. It may seem obvious, but I have found again and again that when, in the course of a general conversation, you ask a student, or anyone, what they feel, they will often tell you what they think. The *what* is much easier to access than the *how*.

Once the distinction between these is clarified, a next step is to sense with increasing clarity the nuances of a felt experience. By this I mean the actual process of what it is like to do something. What do you do to spell a word? Does it come all at once, or letter by letter? Do you see the letters? Are they close or far away? In color or black and white? Handwritten or printed? What do you do to bring your mother's face to mind? Do you remember a specific moment? Are there feelings associated with that moment? Do those feelings trigger other feelings even now? Or does something else entirely occur? When you write a paper, what do you actually do to encourage ideas, to recognize them when they come, and know how you will deploy them? Do you stare into space, take a walk, go inside your mind-body in some way?

The point is that if you pay at least occasional attention to the *how* without getting lost in the *what*, it puts you directly in touch with your own experience. And this is useful. Conversations that touch into experience, whether with a friend, a teacher, or a therapist, are the conversations that shift our perception. This is a domain of tremendous learning.

My emphasis on this comes not only from Buddhist sources, but also the work of Claire Petitmengin and Michel Bitbol, as well as Eugene Gendlin, in titles I list below. Buddhist traditions themselves are very explicit about the broad spectrum of knowing they support. They describe moving from the wisdom of

hearing, or intellectual understanding, to experiential knowing as it uniquely dawns in one's own mind and body, leading to the wisdom of meditation, namely a realization that is thoroughly integrated in one's approach to life itself.

### **In the Classroom: Who Teaches What?**

In my case, I offer a combination of very simple distillations of traditional practices and exercises designed to open up a particular topic. These latter are very useful, as they do not involve formal meditation and lead to lively reflection in conversation.

I've trained in several contemporary styles of practice, in addition to life-long exploration of traditional Tibetan ones. So I have my own long-term experience with the methods I repurpose for the classroom.

But another way to go is for the teacher to transparently be nearly as new to the exercise as the students. One can then compare notes with interest and curiosity in everyone's take. It's an exploration. The purpose is not to come to a conclusion. The purpose is to see. The success of this would depend very much on the teacher and atmosphere and relationships in the classroom.

Sometimes what is seen is surprising: A colleague and I taught for many years a "contemplative practicum" which met for one hour per week. It was intended as a "lab" for students taking courses on religion, mysticism, art, music, or another area related to the contemplative. However, in practice, most of the students were not taking any such course; they simply wanted to learn how to relax and escape the stress of student life. They consistently wrote the most rewarding evaluations either of us have ever received. They called it life-changing, an invaluable portal to understanding they could not have received otherwise. So I have been moved to bring some of that to my other classes as well.

### **Classroom Exercises**

As a way of noticing what it might be like to become aware of and yet not be reactive to impulses, I sometimes give this little assignment. At your next meal (usually shortly following class) do this for your first three bites: Chew and swallow completely before reaching for the next bite.

Students often have quite a lot to say about this. For one, it's harder than they think.

With this recognition in the air, and after just listening to what students have to say, you can guide the conversation in a variety of ways, but the most important thing to start with is encouraging the students to explore their own reactions. I might then ask them to consider their experience in the context of, for example, training in patience, or simply register their surprise at how strong even our most benign and common impulses are, how they run us. This can lead to discussions of ethics, empathy with others who are also being run by their impulses, and so on. Those who teach in a more scientific or psychological context can speak in terms of self-regulation, the proprietary nature of anxiety (how it takes over everything), or recent neuroscientific discoveries about how contemplation affects the brain. I sometimes show short videos by Richard Davidson or Jeremy Hunter, for example. They are very powerful.

Another important discovery I seek to facilitate is that even in a short time it is possible to move from a state of agitation to very different state. It is a temporary shift to be sure, and yet a revelation that such a different experience could be so close at hand. I also do short, simple guided meditations, inviting folks to notice the sense of contact with their seat, and then sense into the feeling of breath moving through nose, chest, and/or abdomen. There is often a simple but a notable shift. Body and breath are always in the present, and sensing into either can bring a taste of what it's like to be free of the usual hurly-burly mind. So we talk about that interesting and overlooked dimension of human competence.

Kindness and compassion are important across many traditions and disciplines. The famous Tibetan practice of sending-and-removing is easily distilled into terms widely understood. First, bring to mind someone you like and the natural sense of friendliness and wish for their welfare that comes to mind. Perhaps you notice that your body relaxes a bit just with that. If so, you can let that feeling ride your exhalation, and in this way send it to another person, gradually expanding this to two and three persons, perhaps those sitting across from you in the classroom. And feel that the other person is benefitting from this in whatever way they feel they need to do.

I usually wouldn't do this until the class has done various other exercises together. But with this one I often ask them to sit in triads, with two persons at a time "sending" to the third who is just receiving. Afterwards I give them a little time to talk among themselves. Some folks are shy, but the room usually buzzes. There are many ways to adapt this.

Sometimes I just encourage folks to do this kind of gift-giving breathing as they walk across campus, to breathe out this way, say, three times a day, three breaths each. The response, again, is sometimes very powerful.

In the contemplative practicum mentioned above, I would do a variety of guided meditations over the semester, always beginning with sensing into body and breath. These would last about fifteen-to-twenty minutes, and then we would discuss. After one of the first such sessions, an undergraduate completely new to contemplative engagement, said "Wow. I never knew sound had color." This is a fairly common experience, though not usually quite so quick to dawn. It has interesting implication for our understanding of the senses, the phenomenon of synesthesia, and other anomalies or ordinary experience.

Two rules of thumb: share only those things you've experimented with yourself and find meaningful, and don't do anything that doesn't feel comfortable in the actual environment of that specific class on that specific day.

There are many other possibilities of course. These are just example of how something quite simple, and relatively brief, can be illuminating and very rewarding.

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## Contemplative Pedagogy

Harold D. Roth, Brown University

I understand “contemplative pedagogy” within the practical and philosophical contexts we have developed at Brown in our novel undergraduate concentration (major) in contemplative studies, which began in 2014 and has graduated twenty-seven students. Nonetheless, even if you don’t have a program like that at your home institution, we think the methods we have developed are broadly applicable. I will begin by setting up our context.

Let me begin by contrasting contemplative studies as an academic field from religious studies. In our field we do the same kind of careful scholarly research on the historical, philosophical, and cultural backgrounds of the sources we study (texts, archaeological evidence, etc.), but we focus on the contemplative dimensions within them. We bring these dimensions into dialogue with the most rigorous scientific studies of the effects of contemplative practices that have been completed during the last four decades. This research has occurred mainly in the brain sciences and in a variety of clinical applications often derived from various forms of “mindfulness” techniques. The most widely accepted of these methods is Jon Kabat-Zinn’s “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction.”

Students concentrating in contemplative studies can focus on one of two tracks: the humanities (especially philosophy of mind and contemplative religious traditions) and the sciences (especially neuroscience and cognitive science). Students who focus in one of these tracks are required to develop critical competence in the other. We bookend their study with a required methods course, “Introduction to Contemplative Studies,” and a required Senior Concentrators Seminar. The introductory seminar presents the theoretical foundations for the field, such as Alan Wallace’s *The Taboo of Subjectivity* and Francisco Varela, Evan Thompson, and Eleanor Rosch’s critique of cognitive science, *The Embodied Mind*, as well as introduces methods for critical first-person study of contemplative practices. The purpose of this concentrators seminar is to bring students from our various tracks, who have taken a broad array of courses in the sciences and humanities, together to focus on developing a clearer understanding of the field and its contemporary issues.

Foundational to our attempts to define this field of study is the following definition of “contemplation.” We see it as the focusing of attention in a sustained fashion leading to: deepened states of concentration, tranquility, and insight; a broadening of the awareness; and eventually to self-contextualizing experiences that are the basis of other-regarding virtues such as empathy, compassion, and love which provide a crucial foundation for social engagement.

In addition, contemplation occurs on a spectrum: from the rather common spontaneous experiences of absorption in an activity which have been explored in the scientific research generated around psychologist Mihalyi Csíkszentmihalyi's concept of the state of optimal experience he called "flow" to the most profound experiences deliberately cultivated in religious traditions.

### Teaching Strategy

How this works out in the classroom is that we have developed what we call an "integrative contemplative pedagogy" that focuses on a "critical first-person approach" to the study of contemplative sources. What's "critical" about it is that we actually try out contemplative practices in the classroom that are directly related to particular sources we are studying, while also exploring this source from the third-person, "objective," at-a-distance perspectives that are common in the humanities and the sciences. In other words, we teach students the same practices they might encounter in a spiritual practice center, but we teach them the cognitive frameworks in which these practices are embedded from a third-person critical perspective, and we urge students to empirically study these practices without any prior commitment to their efficacy as might be expected or enforced in a devoted spiritual center. Doing this adds an important experiential element to their study of these sources that there is no other way to obtain.

For example, when we study a normative Buddhist text like the *Anapannasati sutta* (On the Mindfulness of Breathing), we study the history and philosophy of the early Buddhist canon, we try out the practices detailed in the text of mindfully attending to inhalation and exhalation while sitting still, and we look at a relevant scientific article that explores mindfulness meditation. We understand what the tradition claims will be the results of such practices and we approach those claims from a critical position that includes these third-person perspectives as well as the first-person perspective of trying out the practice itself. We also discuss how practicing in a secular context differs from practicing in a spiritual context.

We pursue third-person study through reading a variety of sources including the contemplative texts in translation and secondary works that provide their philosophical and historical contexts. We pursue critical first-person study of the contemplative practices that are discussed or that underlie these practices in "meditation labs" that are a distinct part of each course. Usually our courses meet from two-and-a-half to three hours each week; the "Medlabs" have exactly the same time devoted to them.

Probably the greatest concern about this methodological approach is the appearance to colleagues in religious studies of uncritically proselytizing for a particular religion. To protect against this perception as much as possible, it is crucial that the course include a clear and unequivocal affirmation of its critical spirit and empirical nature. Such a statement should emphasize that although students are learning a contemplative practice and the cognitive framework in which this practice is embedded, they are *never* asked to *believe in the veridicality* of those cognitive frameworks. This is essential to the use of first-person methodologies in a secular university.

This is an example of the statement of our empirical approach to studying contemplative traditions I have used in many courses:

The point of the meditation laboratory is not to convert anyone to any of the contemplative traditions we are studying in this course: I *never* require that you believe in anything, Hindu, Buddhist, Confucian, Daoist, or otherwise. All I ask is that you approach the experience with an open mind and simply observe what is happening while you are meditating.

The modern Western academy is dominated by what we might call “third-person” learning. We observe, analyze, record, discuss a whole variety of subjects at a distance, as something “out there,” as if they were solely objects and our own subjectivity that is viewing them doesn’t exist. Certainly there are exceptions to this: in public speaking, in studio art, theatre, and sometimes in music, environmental studies and other disciplines, students combine academic study with direct first-hand experience of what they are studying. But in general, in the humanities we tend to value “third-person” learning at the expense of all other forms. Despite this, I have found that when students are called upon, for example, to reflect on what a *haiku* poem means to them, or to actually try to write one, they gain a greater understanding than if they simply read and critique them. And when students are challenged to apply Confucian ethical theories to observe patterns of social interaction in their own lives, they gain a much greater appreciation of what it means to be truly humane from a Confucian perspective.

This course is an example of what we call “critical first-person learning.” I say “critical” because in many forms of first-person learning in the contexts of a religious tradition, one must suspend critical judgment and believe in the various truths of the tradition. There is an important place for this form of “committed” first-person learning in our private lives, but we should be careful to not require that kind of commitment in a secular university.

By contrast, in the “critical first-person learning” about contemplative practices and their cognitive frameworks we do in this course, the need to believe is removed. We will read and analyze a variety of texts on meditation (“third-person learning”); we will observe how our minds and bodies work while trying out a variety of simple meditation techniques derived from these texts (“first-person learning”); and we will critically discuss these texts in light of our experiences in the “Meditation Laboratory.” You will also be asked to keep a note-card journal on which you will record brief comments or observations at the end of every lab session.

The Meditations Labs are an important element in this dual aspect pedagogy, However if, for health or other reasons there is a student who is *unable* to participate in the Meditation Laboratory, I will be happy to make arrangements for doing alternate work of equivalent value.

The recommended readings in the course constituted the “alternative work of equivalent value.” I have been teaching courses with these meditation labs for nineteen years and have taught well over a thousand students. Only two have ever taken me up on this option.

## Conclusions and Extensions

There are readily observable benefits from this pedagogy. When students get to try out contemplative practices that are directly related to the texts they are studying they gain a much deeper understanding of the texts and the traditions that produced them. This is nothing more than an application of this famous educational principle of John Dewey:

...education, in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society, must be based upon experience—which is always the life experience of some individual...There is no discipline in the world so severe as the discipline of experience subjected to the tests of intelligent development and direction...<sup>1</sup>

In addition there is a second important benefit from this contemplative pedagogy: students learn a basic approach to the first-hand experience of contemplative practice that often stays with them long after they complete the course. In the famous words of William James:

...the faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will...An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*...<sup>2</sup>

Over the almost two decades I have taught such courses, many graduates have written me back that they are still using contemplative methods they learned in one of our Medlab courses.

We are fortunate at Brown to have had the range of faculty in the sciences, humanities, and arts to institute a full academic concentration in contemplative studies. But there does not need to be such a program for faculty to build their own courses using these basic principles and practices. Ideally it is very helpful if an instructor has had some extensive training in one or more contemplative traditions. This helps if one wishes to lead the critical first-person practices on one's own. However, if one doesn't have the expertise to lead Medlabs oneself, then one can make use of contemplative practitioners from the surrounding community. Colleagues at a number of institutions have done this to great success.

Potential pitfalls of contemplative pedagogy include approaching it without a clear definition of "contemplation" and without the proper critical apparatus. Just adding a meditation practice to a course without understanding its cultural context and how colleagues and administrators might perceive this is a recipe for trouble. I think it also helps to have a basic knowledge of the relevant scientific literature on the effects of contemplative practices, especially when it comes to university administrators who might be concerned about justification for doing this. Another problem is establishing qualifications for classroom teaching. If you are going to teach some contemplative practices yourself, then what kind of training is necessary? Is it enough to read a book about practice or to attend a two-day workshop? What does this qualify you to do? We have outlined an approach to this in materials that can be found in the "contemplative program development" section of the Brown contemplative studies website, which

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<sup>1</sup> John Dewey, *Education and Experience* (New York, NY: Kappa Delta Pi, 1938), 89–90.

<sup>2</sup> William James, *The Principles of Psychology* (New York, NY: Henry Holt, 1890), 463.

contains materials from our program at Brown as well as from programs and courses that have been developed at a number of other academic institutions. These emerged from a “think tank” on contemplative program-building in September 2017 that was funded by the Mind and Life Institute. Other helpful materials as well as videos of some of the over 200 lectures, workshops, and concerts we have organized over the past fourteen years at Brown can also be found here:

<https://www.brown.edu/academics/contemplative-studies/>.

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## Teaching Contemplation in 3D

Michael Sheehy, University of Virginia

*Contemplation* is a dense term with a diverse range of meanings that have shifted semantically across different times, cultures, and languages. For instance, the terms “contemplation” and “meditation,” from early Christianity up through Early Modern European usage, have ironically evolved to mean the opposite of what they mean in contemporary English parlance. Contemplation now typically has the connotation of cognitively engaging a topic, thinking it over; meditation has come to mean a quiescent concentration. In the classroom, and across contemporary secular settings, the term “contemplation” has been adapted and expanded to include a broader scope of meaning.

To take contemplation seriously, both teachers and students are invited to co-participate in critical and creative thinking about the primacy of subjectivity. For many religious studies scholars, taking subjectivity to be an object of serious inquiry invokes reticence towards an apologetic stance. As religious studies scholars, we are trained in certain disciplinary structures and methods that have historically informed the ways that we produce knowledge, and these ways deter us from taking subjectivity seriously. The field of religious studies has historically inherited structures and methods from the modern theoretical project of objectifying the world of experience, and it applied these to the study of religious phenomena. This paradigm presents objective knowledge as if it exists outside a given lived world, divorced from subjective experience. The problem is that this entire project of objective knowledge production takes place within the world of experience.

Contemplative pedagogies employ first-person inquiry, a methodology that valorizes the world of experience in both research and teaching. The value of first-person inquiry, and the critical subjectivity that it ensues, is that this it enables students to gain an observable distance from their own internal experiences and to investigate previously unexamined assumptions and potential biases. First-person inquiry has increasingly become relevant not only in the basic and social sciences, but also in religious studies, and it is a cornerstone to contemplative studies.

I have come to think about contemplation not merely in the narrow sense of a prescribed set of practices, though the application of specific techniques to acquire intentional outcomes is critical, but rather as a performative range that cultivates cognitive, affective, and somatic experiences. These contemplative experiences correlate to sets or families of contemplative practices, including practices that are characteristically analytical, attentional, constructive or deconstructive, imaginative, or kinetic. Contemplation is not meant to be a static or uniform practice, but rather a set of flexible processes to be pedagogically employed. Depending on lesson, time, and setting, students may be receptive to different

types of practices, and are affected variably. There are however pedagogically constructive frames in which to scaffold contemplative processes. The following is a summary of my current thinking about the scope of contemplation and its pedagogical efficacies in classroom settings.

### **Contemplation in 3D**

In thinking about how to define contemplation in higher education, I suggest framing contemplation and its extensive practices within a heuristic that has three dimensions: (1) reflection, (2) contextualization, and (3) transformation.

#### Reflection

As the first dimension of contemplation, practices of reflection bring awareness to thoughts, emotions, and bodily sensations, or probe the meaning of a specific topic of inquiry in relationship to the self. These reflective processes activate the operations of mind that facilitate observation and learning about the self. Most basically, practices of reflection emphasize oscillations between the operations of attention, meta-awareness, and mindfulness. This includes practices that cultivate a selective attention by directing awareness to a chosen intellectual topic or query, thought, emotion, or sensation. Practices that cultivate meta-awareness observe the ongoing processes and fluctuations of one's own bodily and mental movements. The operation of meta-awareness functions in a twofold capacity to both (a) monitor the body and awareness by consciously scanning and detecting experiences, and (b) be reflexive as spontaneous self-awareness. Mindfulness practices are cultivated and applied to intentionally notice what occupies your attention and to recurrently bring your attention back to the topic of contemplation. These three operations work synchronously to practice reflection by bringing attentional balance to a chosen topic of inquiry, monitoring via meta-awareness the experiential contents of consciousness in connection to that topic, and intentionally recalling the topic of inquiry when the mind wanders or becomes distracted.

**Pedagogical practices of reflection** engage students' attention on a topic or inquiry, and have them sustain their attention on this inquiry through supportive practices. An example of this family of practices is to:

1. Choose a topic in the form of a question;
2. Analyze and investigate the significance of that question by noticing what thoughts or sensations emerge in response;
3. Stabilize the mind and body in stillness for a duration of five to ten minutes, so as to be attentive to that response;
4. Repeat this session in a recurrent manner during two to three classes, and after each session, have the students write down the ideas that emerged from sitting with the inquiry;
5. After the final session, pair students in dyads to practice deep listening in a structured dialogue or facilitate a phenomenological interview about the inquiry, and their response;
6. Ask the students to discuss how their response to the inquiry could be integrated, or at least its current iteration, into their own thinking and behavior.

## Contextualization

The second dimension of contemplation is practices of contextualization. This dimension involves (a) practices that notice and bring attention to the context in which the self is situated in relationship to other social or environmental variables; (b) practices that contextualize the self within a given context, whether it be social, cultural, environmental, global, cosmological, or some other factor; and (c) using communal, environmental, cosmological contexts, and so forth, as starting points for practice. This dimension of contemplation, as well as its pedagogical efficacies, recognizes that contemplation is a family of cultural practices, and that these practices have ethical and social consequences.

Practices of contextualization challenge the current normative discourse that suggests contemplative practice, particularly mindfulness, is *a priori* the cultivation of private mental states. This family of contextualization practices is a dynamic nexus that includes the cultivation of cognitive and emotional skills, development of behaviors and bodily movements, antidotal applications to symptoms, and situatedness within social contexts. These practices work to develop the variegated competencies of a practitioner so to more fully familiarize the self within the contexts in which they are embedded and integrate the skills necessary for being responsive to those contexts. This includes practices that monitor the positionality of the self at its social and political intersections of race, ethnicity, class, sex, gender, and ability. By identifying the self in context, and iteratively contextualizing the self, these practices accentuate the ethical consequences of contemplation. Contextualization intentionally cultivates pro-social practices, including empathic responsiveness, compassion, resilience, etc., that orient the self to develop connections to the environs and persons in their world. In this way, this family of practices is enhanced by second-person perspectives that are intersubjective, dialogic, and dyadic, as well as third-person perspectives that inform the self about the contextual landscapes in which they practice.

**Pedagogical practices of contextualization** engage students in thinking about how they are situated in social relationships and environments, how these contexts affect them, and what they can do to reorient themselves in specific contexts. An example of this family of practices is to:

1. Invite students to imagine themselves in their immediate classroom environment, detailing features of the room (including the walls, furniture, fellow students, etc.);
2. Gradually zoom-out to imagine the campus grounds, the town or city in which they are in, the state, continent, planet—detailing features of each broader context—zooming all the way out to the cosmos;
3. After a pause and reflection on their situatedness in the cosmos, gradually zoom back in through the successive contexts in reverse until they are back on their seat in the classroom;
4. Conclude with discussion about reflections on their perceptions of themselves going through this contextualization practice.

While elements of reflection and transformation are currently being studied in relation to contemplation, particularly within scientific research on contemplative practices, the dimension of contextualization has to-date not been given sufficient attention. This is a ripe area of research for humanities scholars, particularly to be studied through an interdisciplinary lens with colleagues in the

social sciences. Contemplations that situate the student in their given contexts, and which query through reflections on their connections to the environs and social relationships in which they are embedded, can have transformative effects.

### Transformation

The third dimension of contemplation is practices of transformation. This dimension of contemplation includes both (a) processes of learning that are transformative through contemplative practices and (b) translation of the effects of those transformations into frameworks that articulate the plasticity of the brain, body, and mind. Primarily, this dimension recognizes that learning is transformative and pedagogies that apply contemplation can enhance, encourage, and optimize learning. A pedagogy that appreciates the transformative dimension of contemplation orients the student and their processes of learning at its center, and employs practices of contemplation to facilitate active processes of cognitive, affective, and somatic integrations and adaptations to newly emergent understandings. Taking subjectivity seriously, both the teacher's inescapable own subjectivity as well as that of the student's, this family of practices seeks to transform that subjectivity because it foresees new horizons for that subjectivity. Transformation can be changes from acquiring or discovering new knowledge through contemplation, but it also involves the transformative processes that noticeably alter attitudes and behaviors as well as physiological and neurological traits that correlate to those transformations.

**Pedagogical practices of transformation** engage students in practices of noticing their responses and how they can progressively shape their behavioral responses over time to situations, emotions, sensations, and thoughts. An example of this family of practices is to:

1. Encourage students to choose a behavior that they want to change in themselves;
2. Invite them for five minutes at the beginning of each class to imagine themselves behaving differently;
3. Have them log a journal entry of their moods and experiences each day after they have practiced this exercise;
4. After two weeks, organize them in dyads to share with their fellow students what they have noticed in their own behavior during that period of time;
5. Repeat every two weeks throughout the semester.

Each of these dimensions of contemplation involves a process of discovery facilitated through a diverse family of practices that enable students to learn something new about themselves and how they identify with content presented in a course. A contemplative pedagogy may emphasize one dimension, focus on the student's relationship to a chosen course topic within a given dimension, or engage a dimension at the intersections of second- and third-person perspectives. Ideally, throughout a course, each of these dimensions will be engaged through personal contemplative practices, interpersonal dialogue or dyadic practices with fellow students, and interdisciplinary perspectives that engage these dimensions in connection to the course content. As heuristics, these three dimensions are meant to serve as touchstones for teachers to retain their pedagogical work within a contemplative frame.

There is no necessary sequence, but each can be applied nonlinearly, according to course content and the needs of students. These three distinct dimensions, and their correlative family of practices, is optimally utilized in a complementary manner to comprise a whole contemplation on a given inquiry or set of topics. These three dimensions are not mutually exclusive. For instance, an attentional practice involves meta-awareness and cognizance of internal content, which is reflective, while also contextual if open-monitoring awareness is practiced in connection to environmental phenomena, and transformative because it cultivates attentional balance and reduces discursivity. In this way, while each dimension comprises distinct families of practice, they are integrated in various ways, and these three dimensions can work pedagogically in unison to optimize the learning of the whole student.

To think critically or creatively is not merely the act of having thoughts. To analyze, appraise, or probe an idea is a learned skill and a process of learning, just like the appraisal of a bodily sensation is learned. This kind of thinking or sensing is learned through the intentional application of strategies and techniques, and if we are to understand contemplation in educational contexts, both in life and in the classroom, I argue that it is important for us to examine intentional methods for how we think and learn. For the examination of the very protocols of how we learn gives meaning to contemplation; and conversely, contemplation (in its broad sense) is a range of methods for making meaning and understanding the processes of meaning-making.

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## **Reading with a Fresh Mind: Contemplative Reading Exercise**

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### **Contemplative Reading Exercise**

Introducing the sacred texts of various religious traditions has been a staple in my undergraduate courses over the years. The purpose of the exercise is to encourage students to animate their personal encounter with the text as part of the learning process. It is also encouragement to study the cultural and religious context of a text with the quality of direct encounter as the ground.

1. Create a positive, open atmosphere in which to offer the practice to students. This is a process of discovery and creative engagement. There are no wrong answers. In general, students respond better if they know ahead of time why they are doing something. If a student objects to participating in this exercise, come up with an alternate activity, such as a free write, for them to engage instead.
2. Let students know that the class will be studying a passage of a sacred text, briefly giving historical dates, cultural context, known authorship, religious tradition, original language, and translator in a very general way.
3. Let the class know there will be a discussion and chance to talk about their experiences afterwards. I have found this helps students to go more deeply into their experience.
4. Having made copies for the class of the passage of text, fold your chosen reading in half (so that one cannot see the words) and hand out copies to each student.
5. Have all students open their copies of the text at the same time. Slowly read it aloud to the class, while everyone follows along silently. Encourage everyone to stay naively present, paying attention to the literal words, rather than trying to interpret the text. Let the words penetrate.
6. Now students read the text repeatedly for themselves, moving slowly and just staying with the actual words. Invite students to develop a sense of curiosity about the words they are reading. While meanings may begin to dawn, do not try to make them consistent or coherent. Encourage students to notice how it feels to stay with one relatively short piece of writing for an extended period of time (three-to-six minutes, depending on the length of the text). Ask them to resist coming to any conclusions about the meaning of the passage.

7. Divide students into small groups of two-to-three people to share some of their reflections on the meaning as well as on the process of contemplative reading. What layers of meaning arose for them as they repeatedly re-read the text?
8. Students return once more to the reading, this time focusing on the analysis of the text. Guide everyone to reflect on the interpretation of the words and on the various meaning(s) within the reading. Students can make notes on the text if they like.
9. Then, introduce a period of quiet interiority, without reading the text, encouraging students to relax their minds and invite curiosity, insights, questions that might arise without any bias for or against them.
10. Return to the text a third time. This time, ask students to express or write a response to the reading, letting their own voices begin to surface. Invite students to write their own poem/prose in response to this reading.
11. Have students return to their small groups to share their writing or creative expression, and their response to the exercise.
12. Have a group discussion about this overall experience including any challenges and insights that emerged. Guide students to notice any response they had to the exercise. What was it like to just stay with the words? What was it like to spend time reflecting deeply on the meaning? What was noticed before, during, or just after the practice? How did their relationship to the text develop over the course of the exercise? Was something as habitual as reading experienced in a new way through this practice?

### Contemplative Education

Paul J. Griffiths describes how in contemporary higher education we professors have come to read as consumers, extracting “what is useful or exciting or entertaining...preferably with dispatch, and then to move on to something else.”<sup>1</sup> He contrasts this with a more traditional type of reading, derived from religious practices East and West, which are more like those of “a lover, to caress, lick, smell, and savor words on the page, and to return to them ever and again.”<sup>2</sup> Unfortunately, we are passing these habits on to our students as well, robbing them of the sheer pleasure and wealth of immersing in the words of the texts we read.

I was motivated to develop contemplative pedagogies in my religious studies courses by my own experience of seeing the impact of disciplined interiority on my own scholarship and teaching. In my first academic position, at a state university, I was disheartened by the apathy of the students, the limited forms of communication in the large lecture course, and the consumerist approach of the entire university. There had to be a more gratifying approach to teaching and learning. When I began to

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<sup>1</sup> Paul J. Griffiths, *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1999), ix.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

develop exercises for slowing down academic reading and writing and for encouraging students to trust their own inner wisdom, I began to enjoy teaching again. Class discussions were enriched, students showed up in the classroom in a more embodied way, and exams and academic papers became more interesting and original. Not all the students were in school only for the grade.

This contemplative reading exercise comes from the contemplative education movement that adapts pedagogies from religious traditions to a secular context of the university classroom. My home institution, Naropa University, was founded with a vision of integrating contemplative exercises into every academic discipline and almost every course. What distinguishes contemplative education from just “good teaching” is the strategic focus on the development of “first-person inquiry,” that brings personal experience and inner-wisdom into the learning process. This mode of inquiry is not mere opinion, established narrative, or reaction; instead, it is the disciplined process of returning the attention to the passage of text and dropping immediate notions of what is meant. This kind of practice mirrors the disciplines of Tibetan Buddhist contemplation and Benedictine *Lectio Divina* that move the mind to deeper reflection about inner meanings of the words or passages studied.

First-person inquiry is often associated with critical subjectivity that is the fruit of rigorous training and cultivation with meditation and contemplation practices, as well as creative process in artistic traditions. It is critical because of its ability to focus in the present moment, to discover emergent wisdom arising in specific investigations. In the exercise above, the instruction to refrain from quick judgment or reaction reflects the discipline of staying with a passage of text without jumping to conclusions. This eventually yields a much more sophisticated and nuanced understanding of the text.

First-person inquiry differs from second-person, which draws on interactive and experiential learning derived from dialogue, internships and service learning, and study abroad experiences. Third-person inquiry, the bread and butter of university pedagogy, draws on the annals of science, humanities, and social science and involves mastery of information, logics, contexts, and discoveries of our academic forebears. First-person inquiry can never stand alone in higher education. Its intercourse with second- and third-person inquiry bring multidimensionality to learning that engages the whole person and enlivens inquiry and investigation. As can be seen above, the contemplative reading exercise uses all three modes of inquiry to deepen the learning process.

### **Impact of Contemplative Pedagogy**

In my years of teaching, this way of introducing contemplative reading has whetted the students’ appetites for learning. Contemplative reading suggests that they could make a personal relationship with the sacred text of another’s tradition on a personal, resonant level in a setting in which their own inner-wisdom is honored and encouraged. This, then, has become the ground for further inquiry and a nuanced understanding of what is involved in studying sacred texts in context, even while recognizing that there are resonances available that are not defined only by culture. I have usually followed this exercise with a more structured analysis and discussion that explores these aspects.

It is ironic that in religious studies there has been such a resistance to the cultivation of interiority, based on our history of becoming a respected academic discipline. In an attempt to distinguish our field from

that of theology or from religious institutions that proselytize, we have become immediately suspicious of subjectivity, silence, and anything that may look like religious practice.

But the pendulum has swung so far into hyperobjectivity that we may be depriving our students of their yearning to slow down, reflect, and delve into the existential questions of their lives in an educational setting. Instead, many of them may turn to professors who teach mindfulness or spirituality in classrooms far away from religious studies. Many of those professors may do so without the sophistication and training to refrain from cultural appropriation, thinly veiled guru complexes, or sensitivity to pluralism and the privacy of their students.

This exercise in contemplative reading cannot be regarded as religious, even though it has been adapted from religious communities for whom study has been a form of worship. Contemplative pedagogies draw inspiration from many sources, including artistic disciplines that cultivate creative process. The primary challenge is to develop methods that do not merely entertain students, but ones that draw them into cognizance of their most deeply held opinions, habits, and views that contrast with their present-moment wisdom. One method that develops this cognizance is the repeated shifting of attention from the content of their thoughts to the larger field of awareness in which those thoughts arise. An effective way to do this is attentional training or mindfulness that returns to a simple focus on a neutral object over and over again. William James famously spoke of this as “voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again” as “the root of judgment, character and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be *the education par excellence*.”<sup>3</sup> Parallels are found in diverse contemplative traditions from Buddhism and yoga to the prayer traditions of the Desert Fathers and Mothers.

Contemplative reading can be altered to fit a variety of academic disciplines and can be used in a variety of religious studies courses. Cultivating a dynamic, nonconsumer relationship with what we read has the potential to transform teaching and learning into a meaningful engagement with a sacred text, a literary piece of prose or poetry, or a passage of philosophical argument that can have a lasting effect on ourselves and our students.

For more information on contemplative reading practice, see

<https://www.naropa.edu/academics/cace/resources/pedagogy-trainings/contemplative-reading.php>.

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# Appendix

## Smartphone Dis/Connect: FOMO

Student Name:

Partners:

While we may have some sense of how our lives are lived through our devices, we rarely take a moment to more closely consider the subtle impacts they have on the quality of our experience.

This contemplative exercise asks you to directly investigate some of these impacts and to reflect upon how they might affect your experience more generally, whether on your phone or off.

For those of you who are unfamiliar with contemplative practice, there are many techniques and objects but a very common one focuses on the breath as a basis. There is nothing inherently religious or philosophical about this exercise; instead, it simply employs the attentional faculty of mind to closely observe your experience.

So now, please close your eyes or relax your gaze down and take three deep breaths, pausing for a few moments at the top of each inhalation, and relaxing for a few moments into the space of every exhalation. Rest with your awareness as it tunes into the natural process of breathing. Whenever you notice that mind has been drawn off to some other object, which is natural as well, simply let go regardless of the content, take another deep breath, and begin focusing on the breath anew.

[Silent practice, 2–3 minutes].

Now, while maintaining a gentle awareness of the breath as an anchor for your experience, slowly and deliberately take out your device. Watch whatever thoughts and feelings arise as you reach for it, grasp it, remove it, activate the screen, and encounter the information displayed upon it. While taking note of the content of your experience, retain a sense of connection to the breath.

Now go into the settings on your device, turn on all alerts and notifications for all apps, and set the volume on the loudest level. Then place your device out of reach [direct according to seating circumstances in the room] and place your hands in your lap. Please remain still, keeping your hands in your lap; do not under any circumstances reach for or touch your phone.

Take a few more deep breaths, using it to maintain a sense of center while opening up awareness to the full range of experience. As alerts and notifications ring out, whether from your device or others', closely observe whatever thoughts and feelings arise in the mind and body while remaining completely still.

[Silent practice in the midst of alerts and notifications, 5–15 minutes]

Now, please take a final deep breath, allowing the mind to clear, then pick up your phone, set it to “airplane mode,” and put it away, preferably back in your bag and not in your pocket. Then, maintaining silence, respond in writing to the prompts on the back of this sheet:

Describe the physical sensations that arose in body during this exercise (changes in temperature, tension, breathing, heart rate, etc.). Did you correlate any physical sensations to the thoughts or emotions that arose?

Describe the thoughts that arose during this exercise, not just in terms of content but in terms of quality: were they slow or fast? Well-formulated or spontaneous and reactive? What kinds of thoughts arose?

Describe the emotions that arose during this exercise: what were the emotional tones of your experience? What caused those feelings to arise?

When directed, discuss your responses with one or more peers, remaining aware of those around you in order to ensure that everyone is included.

[Conclude with full group discussion:]

Given these new insights into the subtle effects of smartphone alerts and notifications, what would you change about your usage to lessen their negative impacts on your life and experience?