Conversation

Contemplative Pedagogy: Frequently Asked Questions

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Abstract. *Contemplative Pedagogy is a new and sometimes controversial pedagogical practice. Faculty often have basic questions about how to implement the pedagogy in their classrooms, in addition to questions that challenge the educational value and appropriateness of the practice. Assembled here are the most frequently asked questions about Contemplative Pedagogy, with responses from six contemplative professors, each from a different institutional and philosophical location. The respondents are founding members of the Contemplative Studies Consultation of the American Academy of Religion. The diversity of views expressed by the respondents invites the reader to see that there is no single theory or praxis of contemplative pedagogy.*

1. What is the benefit of including meditation as part of an academic course? Why not simply encourage students to go to a meditation center or an extracurricular class for wellness, yoga, or meditation?

Anne Klein: The benefits are that students, right in the middle of what is likely the most intensive intellectual training of their lives, and certainly their lives to date, are getting to see that there are ways of knowing in addition to cognitive learning. They also learn in a way that they cannot forget, and they see that these many ways of knowing and learning can be integrated. This in turn means that the types of identities they may have around being an "intellectual" or "smart" can be integrated with identities formed around presence, immediacy of attention, sensory experience, and so on.

Harold Roth: The benefits include: (1) Synergy with the reading material, especially courses on Hinduism, Buddhism, Daoism; (2) Ability to discuss results in a secular classroom; (3) Linking of contemplative practices with the scientific data on them; (4) Discussion of how to integrate them into their lives; and (5) Creation of an open and mutually supportive peer community.

Louis Komjathy: First, students do in fact generally benefit from such courses. They report (in journals and personal communications) increased capacities for relaxing, adapting, and coping with undergraduate life. Second, such courses bridge the "great divide" between student interest in personal growth and values and faculty interest in critical thinking (Barbara Walvoord, *Teaching and Learning in College Introductory Religion Courses*, Blackwell, 2008). Third, faculty may design such courses to address various concerns, issues, and approaches. The latter include critical and disciplined investigation of subjective and inter-subjective experience.

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Tom Coburn: We are aspiring to change the very nature of education and this requires that it be done within the educational heart of an institution, which is the classroom, rather than banishing it to some more marginal place.

2. How does one assess contemplative pedagogy?

Anne Klein: I assess students primarily on the basis of their ongoing steadfastness: coming to class, doing exercises in between classes (they write short paragraphs biweekly, at least), and their ability to integrate that experience, whatever it is, with their understanding of readings or any of the various themes we discuss together.

Fran Grace: I provide specific rubrics for each assignment so that students understand the criteria for grading. For contemplative assignments, there might be criteria such as practice times, levels of sophistication in discussing their first-person practice in relation to readings and course concepts, levels of cultivation with a particular method, and levels of awareness regarding mental and emotional phenomena. When students turn in their assignments, they are required to complete a simple self-evaluation form based on the rubric criteria, thereby assessing their own effort and accomplishment. They have to address each criterion and evaluate how they think they did on a scale that ranges from "needs improvement" to "outstanding." In cases where their self-assessment is much higher than the grade assigned by me, they may see their tendency toward self-inflation. Less frequently, students under-rate themselves and may see a tendency toward self-sabotage or a degraded self-view. The point is to hone their truth radar, and the most difficult truth-telling sometimes is about oneself. Assessment can become a means for deeper self-knowledge.

Harold Roth: I employ several means of assessment. I ask my students to record brief comments on note card journals after each meditation lab. These cards also double as attendance records. In addition, Dr. Willoughby Britton, (a colleague at Brown University,) gives my students a battery of psychological tests, both self-reports and measurements (for example, EEG) before the course and then again afterward. I have not integrated these measurements into course assessment. And I am not sure that I want to.

Tom Coburn: Open-ended questions can be added to the course evaluation forms that are collected in most courses at most universities. These questions can also be administered separately from the standard course evaluations. Also, student journals often reflect on assessment issues.

3. How does one accommodate students who refuse to participate on religious grounds?

Fran Grace: In the many years I have used contemplative methods in the classroom, I have never had a single student refuse on any grounds, religious or otherwise. This holds true for all of the contemplative professors I know; they tell me that only rarely does a student refuse to participate. In my classes, each student is allowed to self-elect particular practices from a range of options that include non-religious contemplative styles.

Harold Roth: If a student were to refuse to participate for religious reasons, I would give them alternate work of equivalent value, drawing from the recommended readings on my syllabus. However in the nineteen contemplative courses I have taught in the past

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decade, only one of approximately two hundred students has ever taken this option – and this was for scheduling constraints (she couldn't attend the thrice-weekly meditation labs because they conflicted with another course required for her concentration).

Louis Komjathy: In well-designed courses, there are no grounds, either "religious" or "secular," for refusal to participate. If courses require contemplative practice, they should be designed so that religious commitments are either bracketed or incorporated in innovative ways. One way to accomplish both of these simultaneously involves allowing students to choose their own contemplative practice from a pre-approved list with corresponding mentors. Such lists should include tradition-specific, religiously committed methods and secular or medicalized methods (for example, the Relaxation Response).

4. Isn't contemplative pedagogy a form of teaching religion and religious practice in the classroom?

Anne Klein: "Contemplative" is a far broader term than "religious." There are many ways of being contemplative, and the ways we use in class require nothing by way of belief or anything resembling a faith commitment – except, of course, student's faith in their own ability to learn in a different and possibly new way.

Fran Grace: I am not a particularly religious person and my understanding of contemplative pedagogy is that it has nothing to do with religion or religious practice or even religious studies as a discipline. I would use contemplative pedagogy if I taught in another discipline, even the hard sciences. The quantum physicist David Bohm spoke of meditation as the best way to be disabused of mental biases in the laboratory. Contemplative methods do not teach, encourage, or require students to become religious or to adopt a particular worldview or faith commitment. Rather, contemplative methods unlock the innate yet often unexplored capacity for intuitive knowledge, expanded consciousness, unconditional compassion for self and others, appreciation for beauty, and creative fulfillment. Religion may point to the Sacred but the Sacred exists apart from religion. I tend to generate contemplative methods that do not have a religious origin or context. For example, I take students outside for ten minutes to closely observe a single aspect of nature such as an insect, a leaf, a palm tree, and so forth. Such contemplative exercises do not aim at religious development but at the cultivation of human awareness.

Judith Simmer-Brown: The motivations that bring students into our classrooms are not religious, and our own motivations for teaching religious studies and theology are also not religious. Presenting contemplative pedagogy is like providing a laboratory for our students so that they can understand their studies in the context of first-person inquiry. We are not creating little Buddhists, Hassids, Sufis, Daoists, or Trappists. Unlike the Eurocentric nature of our belief-centered, creed-centered religious traditions in the Abrahamic West, contemplative practice is about cultivating less belief, and more direct experience. We are returning to the roots of liberal education in the West. Education was meant to "draw out" (Latin *educare*) the brilliance of the student through respect and training.

Louis Komjathy: Contemplative pedagogy may be applied to any discipline and course, and it does not necessarily involve religious commitments. Rather than being characterized by specific religious convictions, contemplative pedagogy places primary

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emphasis on attentiveness and awareness. While some "contemplative teachers" have religious commitments, and those religious commitments may inform their teaching, they are not the focus of classroom teaching and learning. Here we find some overlap with "values-based education" and traditional liberal arts and humanistic concerns.

Harold Roth: Is contemplative pedagogy a form of teaching religion in the classroom? Not at all. There is nothing students have to "believe"; they experiment with contemplative techniques without prior commitment to their efficacy. These are first and foremost psychological techniques for training the attention. Just because they have been cultivated within some religious institutions does not make them inherently "religious."

Tom Coburn: There is not always a hard and fast line between contemplative pedagogy and other kinds of wholistic and integrative education; frequently the latter slide seamlessly into the former. For example, there is no mention of contemplation, religion, or spirituality in Donald Finkel's very stimulating book on faculty development, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut* (Boynton Cook, 2000), but it is very clearly headed in a contemplative direction. Parker Palmer's work is more overt about the contemplative dimension of teaching and learning. See his classic, *The Courage to Teach* (Jossey-Bass, 1998), and his very recent book with Arthur Zajonc, *The Heart of Higher Education: A Call to Renewal, Transforming the Academy through Collegial Conversations* (Jossey-Bass, 2010), which draws significantly on the 2007 conference sponsored by the Fetzer Institute. For a discussion of contemplative pedagogy in state universities, see Laura Rendon's very helpful and powerful book that draws exclusively on interviews with long-term contemplative educators in public institutions: *Sentipensante (Sensing/Thinking) Pedagogy: Educating for Wholeness, Social Justice and Liberation* (Stylus Publishing, 2009).

5. What are the dangers of proselytization in contemplative pedagogy and how are they avoided?

Fran Grace: In my experience, it is not overt proselytization of religious faith or practice that is the dicey issue, but the subtle dynamic of students projecting onto me the status of a "guru." The students in contemplative courses sometimes tap into very powerful inner experiences and they might view the professor as the psychic source of that momentum. Early on, I have to confess, a part of me enjoyed the aura of spiritual attainment implicit in such projections. But projections are not real and my inner practice is to not take credit for a student's insight and awakening, even when they want to give it to me. Yes, I may mentor them as contemplatives, but always in a way that respects their inner authority.

Harold Roth: To avoid the dangers of proselytizing, I make it clear that there is nothing students have to accept on faith – at least nothing more than they do in any college classroom. I have been in many classrooms that are more stifling than our Contemplative Studies Initiative classrooms because professors have their own "true way" of analyzing material and they will not brook any variation from that line. I make sure students know that they are free to accept or reject anything being studied; then there is no problem.

Louis Komjathy: There is no place for proselytization, missionary activity, or intellectual coercion in academia. While certain classes and contexts may make space for

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the expression of personal values and experiences, contemplative pedagogy advocates a "critical first-person approach." This means examining one's own assumptions and qualifying one's own views. Such an approach may help to qualify any totalizing account, such as the academic privileging of secular materialist perspectives and social scientific models.

6. How do you avoid cultural appropriation in the teaching of contemplative practices?

Anne Klein: I make every effort to be transparent when material comes from a specific tradition, and when it is being altered for a specific purpose, perhaps by me, for the classroom situation. Also, in my case, the one-credit contemplative practicum I lead is associated with a seminar or other course in which we read primary texts of the traditions related with our practicum, as well as secondary literature.

Fran Grace: Likely, I have a different view from some of my colleagues on the question of cultural appropriation. Contemplative methods, in my experience, are not tied so much to religious context as to human nature itself. My own contemplative commitments in this lifetime have had very little to do with religion and, in fact, unfolded more freely outside of religion. So this statement by Swami Muktananda in his classic book, *Meditate: Happiness Lies Within You*, rings true for me: "Meditation is universal. It does not belong to the East or to the West, nor does it belong to Hinduism, Buddhism, or Sufism. Meditation is everyone's property, just as sleep is everyone's property; it belongs to humanity" (Siddha Yoga Foundation, 1980, 5). No group or tradition owns inner peace and higher consciousness. So what could be "appropriated"? Yes, when I teach meditation methods which have been developed within a particular tradition (for example, Buddhist *tonglen* meditation), students read about the method from a teacher or sage within that tradition, and we may have a practitioner come to class to give us the religious and communal context of the practice. And I do not personally teach a meditation method associated with a religious tradition unless I have received a transmission to do so from a verified teacher (in this lifetime or a previous one). However, at the end of the day, my teaching approach emphasizes the common aim of inner methods over and above their particularities of "origin."

Judith Simmer-Brown: In order to avoid the charge of cultural appropriation, contemplative practices must be presented in context, showing the religious traditions in which they originated, with information about key figures, sacred texts, belief systems, and traditions of practice. This strategy is especially suited to the religious studies or theology classroom in higher education. Given our scholarly responsibility, it is not acceptable to introduce practices from religious traditions without this kind of education.

Louis Komjathy: Cultural appropriation may be avoided by historically contextualizing contemplative practices and by making space for religious adherents. In the case of religiously committed practices, whether considered in terms of their corresponding traditions or adapted for other purposes, one may emphasize the ways in which such practices have been and continue to be rooted in specific cultures, religious traditions, and soteriological systems. One may also include site-visits and guest-speakers from the traditions. Such activities may be framed in terms of multiculturalism and religious pluralism or inter-religious dialogue. In the case of more modern practices, one may trace

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the intellectual genealogies of the practices, most of which derive from various religious traditions. Another approach involves avoiding "cafeteria-" or "buffet-style courses" that employ spiritual wine-tasting and tourism. One must be vigilant not to reduce contemplative practice to technique, with the corresponding idea that, for example, *Zazen* stripped of an informing Zen Buddhist worldview remains "Buddhist meditation." To use techniques derived from a religious tradition, but removed from a religious community and context involves reconceptualization. Finally, one may have students choose one particular practice and remain committed to the practice throughout the semester. In concert with such a commitment, one may require research on the corresponding tradition and direct experience with an associated teacher and/or community. Such approaches help to avoid the colonialist, domesticating, and Orientalist tendencies of designer, hybrid spirituality and Perennial Philosophy, with their hegemonic assumption of sameness and unity.

7. In what ways can a contemplative-oriented professor bring contemplative awareness to the classroom without ever doing contemplative practices with the students?

Fran Grace: A very simple practice is to pay attention to the ever-present silence underneath all sounds. When I am speaking in a classroom or in my office to students, I am aware constantly of the silence underneath all of the words. In the contemplative training that I follow, words are an artifact of separation. Silence keeps open the possibility of our oneness. We cannot hear words apart from silence. That is a paradox. The words on a page are readable only because there is the whiteness of the page underneath them. The whiteness keeps open the possibility of oneness between writer and reader. The contemplative professor connects to and is always aware of silence, within and without. Awareness of the silence is done completely in silence. No one has to know.

Judith Simmer-Brown: I have known contemplative professors to privately do compassion practices for students, especially the difficult ones. So often we target difficult students and feel threatened by them, and that very perspective seems to make them more belligerent, uncooperative, or sullen. If we as professors could change our view of students, difficult situations can quickly take care of themselves. There are compassion practices in many religious traditions, such as lovingkindness practice in Buddhism, that focus on the basic goodness of our students. Another way to bring contemplative perspective into the classroom is through slowing down the sometimes rapid pace of our classes with "wait time," a pedagogical tool made famous by education specialist Robert Stahl and others. This allows a moment in the classroom for students (and the professor) to let the questions settle and open the mind to a deeper perspective.

Louis Komjathy: One can allow one's own contemplative practice to inform one's teaching by bringing attentiveness and awareness to the classroom. This translates into concern for students, classroom dynamics, and optimal learning environments. One can model presence to students.

Tom Coburn: The Finkel and Palmer books referenced above provide many examples and suggestions by which a contemplative-oriented professor might bring contemplative awareness to the classroom without ever doing contemplative practices with the students (Finkel, *Teaching with Your Mouth Shut*, 2000, and Palmer, *The Courage to Teach,* 1998).

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8. What are some practical suggestions for dealing with situations in which contemplative practice triggers or corresponds to student crises such as mental or physical breakdown?

Anne Klein: It is important to stay in close touch with students. Let them know ahead of time that sometimes meditation can trigger inner states that are not comfortable and need to be explored with a professional. It does not mean that there is anything truly "wrong." It means you have a chance to see things differently in a way that could impact you significantly.

Harold Roth: With regard to the danger of triggering a crisis or breakdown in a student, first make sure that your institution has proper psychological services. Do not try to handle this yourself unless you are qualified. And make sure students know that you are not a spiritual mentor.

Louis Komjathy: When teaching contemplative practice, one needs to be aware of one's strengths and limitations. It is possible that psychological and personal issues will emerge for students. If one is not prepared for and comfortable with this, one should postpone teaching such courses. At the same time, one needs a support network, which ideally includes local teachers, mentors, communities, and university resources. As is the case with mentoring, advising, and tending to students more generally, one should be aware of larger university resources. These include counseling services.

9. What is meant by "first-person" learning? Why is it important?

Fran Grace: How can students become skilled at "critical thinking" unless they are aware of their own thinking? Contemplative first-person learning turns the light of investigation inward. Academia elevates third-person knowledge; it assumes that an expert must be distant from the subject area. First-person knowledge values empirical verification. When I am hiking the long trail up a mountain and feel lost, I would much prefer to hear from a hiker coming down from the peak than from the one reading a guidebook in the parking lot. A guidebook gives third-person knowledge and is valuable only when it is verified by first-person investigation of the trail. Contemplative methods are a first-person means by which to verify (or not) third-person theories and concepts.

Louis Komjathy: Courses that incorporate contemplative practice and experience add an additional dimension to Religious Studies curriculum. By allowing space for a "critical first-person" approach, such courses overcome the "taboo of subjectivity," as B. Alan Wallace refers to it. Rather than adhering to the dominant academic discourse that requires self-alienation and personal fragmentation, such courses make space for a more integrated and holistic approach to education. These courses also allow students to investigate and reflect on the practical and experiential dimensions of religious traditions in an academically rigorous setting.

Such courses may create a unique and exciting educational opportunity. Students gain direct personal experience with contemplative practice and experience. Under the guidance of a sophisticated "contemplative teacher," students learn how to speak from a subjective perspective with appropriate qualification. They also learn how to listen to other perspectives. In this way, such courses increase cultural sensitivity and appreciation for diversity in an engaged fashion, rather than as an intellectual construct or cerebral ideal. These types of courses may be framed as "encounters with others" through guest speak-

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ers (religious adherents and representatives), through participant-observation, or through inter-religious dialogue – depending on the professor, the pedagogical approach, and the institutional context.

Courses in Religious Studies that incorporate contemplative practice and experience also challenge the dominant secular materialist and social scientific discourse of the academy, with its corresponding positivistic and Enlightenment assumptions. From a postmodern and post-colonialist perspective, space must be made for alternative approaches – approaches which include autobiographical, experiential, and interpersonal dimensions. On the more radical end of the spectrum, "critical first-person discourse" would include "critical adherent discourse."

10. What are some suggestions for opening a meditation room or contemplative classroom on a college campus?

Anne Klein: Sometimes a University or College Chapel is available. But as well, it is amazing how an ordinary classroom is transformed by doing a different kind of activity in it.

Fran Grace: Contemplative pedagogy is not dependent on location, setting, or outer conditions. My first several years of contemplative teaching were in an outdated, drab classroom with uncomfortable seat-desks. But pedagogically, it worked out fine.

In 2007, the Vice President for Academic Affairs (VPAA) at our institution supported a faculty-driven proposal to convert one of our underused classroom spaces into a Meditation Room, where we could have academic classes and a space for private quietude for all campus members. The primary benefit of having the space is that it carries the energy of a designated purpose and strong community intention. It is designated for silence, self-inquiry, meditation, peacefulness, and quietude. Students say it is unlike any other space on campus. When they walk through the door, they enter another realm. They take off shoes, turn off cell phones, put backpacks into cubbyholes, and sit on a cushion.

Our VPAA allotted about twelve thousand dollars for the re-fitting of this classroom into a Meditation Room. It was not much money. We made it very simple. There are no religious symbols or culturally specific items in the room. The Contemplative Studies committee that oversees the guidelines and decisions about the space is composed of faculty from various disciplines. It is a space "owned" by all. I serve as the "steward" of the space and do the basic administration and oversight, but I think part of the reason for our Meditation Room's success has been the participation and input from across the campus, and the fact that it was chartered as an academic space, not a "religious" or "community center" space.

Harold Roth: Try to get the use of the dance studio when dancers are not using it.

The outer work can never be small
if the inner work is great.
And the outer work can never be great
if the inner work is small.
– Meister Eckhart

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