

This chapter provides an analysis of contemplative practices, studies, and pedagogy, and a research-based argument for a contemplative philosophy of education, along with suggestions for faculty development.

The Case for a Contemplative Philosophy of Education

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Briefly, “contemplative practices” are exercises in meditative reflection. “Contemplative studies” is the field of scholarship that examines the history, methodology, and theory of contemplative practices. And “contemplative pedagogy” is the philosophy of education that espouses the academic use of contemplative practices. These terms will be described in greater detail.

“Mindfulness” – the act of “bare attention” to the details of experience – is one among many contemplative practices, comes in many varieties, and has many merits. It is the opposite of *mindlessness*, the characteristic of a scattered attention – a problem for many community college students. Focusing the mind, no matter what the focal point, tends to collect mental energy and sharpen attention. Practitioners of mindfulness do not seek to develop more *thought*, but more *awareness of thought* – to “go meta” about thought, or whatever else one chooses as a focal point. Mindfulness engenders the sort of meta-awareness that makes self-regulation possible (Dennett 1984; Bransford 1999).

Contemplative practices are clearly infiltrating science and the academy. For instance, the entire September 2006 issue of the *Teachers College Record* is devoted to contemplative pedagogy. In the past decade, academics from all disciplines have begun to incorporate

contemplative practices into the classroom (Bush 2006). Major grant-providing institutions have funded well over 100 contemplative practice fellowships in the past decade, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (CCMS) and Naropa College's Center for the Advancement of Contemplative Education (CACE) each provide summer seminars on contemplative pedagogy, and top research scientists from diverse backgrounds are collaborating to investigate neuroplasticity from meditation (Begley 2007). This interest has spawned the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE), a national network of over 300 contemplative pedagogy members in its first year (2009).

Contemplative Practices, Studies, and Pedagogy

A *contemplative practice*, more specifically, is a self-reflective or “meta” awareness exercise in which attention is consciously directed toward some element of experience in a focused way in order to deeply examine it, for various reasons. Examples include mindfulness, one-pointedness of focus (concentration), gazing at an object, studying a single sound, contemplating a word or phrase, free-writing, beholding an image, and so on. They are used for self-regulative reasons: stress reduction, self-control, self-exploration, self-expression, creativity, and so on.

Contemplative studies involve the pursuit of *scholarly research about* the traditions, epistemology, mechanics, and scientific effectiveness of contemplative practices. Examples include contemplative neuroscience (Begley 2007), and contemplative historical research, which examines the role of contemplative practices within ancient wisdom traditions (Andressen 2000) or comparatively (Hadot 1995; Goleman 1988). For instance, while Asian philosophy has spawned veritable sciences of meditation (Goleman 1988), Judaic (Green 1987), Christian (Keating 1994), and other wisdom traditions have their store of contemplative practices, as do

animistic/shamanistic traditions (Johnson 1982) and other ways of life (Steinbock 2007).

Quakers, for instance, practice silent meditations similar to *Zen*, and many Christian monastics practice “*lectio divina*” (divine word). A *lectio divina* meditation begins with a reading of a scriptural passage, then silent/mental repetition, and then receptivity to whatever the phrase conjures. Variations on these themes are found among Hasidic Jews and members of other contemplative traditions as well, such as Sufis, for whom dance is a contemplative practice. Similar techniques are found among indigenous peoples throughout history, such as chant, tribal dance, the sweat lodge, and so on. One-pointedness is an element in almost all such practices (Goleman 1988).

Contemplative pedagogies are philosophies of education that promote the *use* of contemplative practices not only as valid modes of teaching and learning (Burggraf 2007), but of knowledge construction and inquiry (Zajonc 2008). As with critical thinking and writing-intensive pedagogies, contemplative pedagogy privileges process over product.

The focus of this volume is contemplative pedagogy, not contemplative studies. Thus, no further elaboration on contemplative studies will be provided here, although reference to contemplative science will play a role in the argument for contemplative pedagogy.

Contemplative Practices. Mindfulness is an exemplar in the scientific/medical research literature, since it is the form of meditation most studied since shown effective in initial studies (Shapiro 2008). Meditation practices are paradigms of contemplative practices (Goleman 1988), and mindfulness is a central meditation practice within the Buddhist tradition (Wallace 2006; Keown 1996). Varieties of mindfulness target different elements of experience, for example, the breath, sensations, or thoughts (Kabat-Zinn 1994). One-pointedness meditation goes in hand with mindfulness, and involves focusing attention on one point, often the breath, but any object,

perception, or sensation may serve as its target.

Some element of one-pointedness is found in almost all forms of meditation (Goleman 1988). To grasp its mechanics, consider candle gazing: The technique is to *gaze* softly at the center of the flame, focus visual attention there, and gently *refocus* there whenever it wanders. (The same technique applies to any target.) The practice of repeatedly reorienting a wandering mind trains the attention, generates concentration, and increasingly strengthens the ability to concentrate (Rose 2009/2010).

William James said that an education that would improve the ability to focus attention at will “would be *the education par excellence*” (1918). While almost *every* meditation exercise involves *some* element of focusing attention, one-pointedness consists in *precisely* this discipline. Thus, one-pointedness training “would be *the education par excellence*.” This insight is Archimedean: Since an element of one-pointedness is present in almost every form of meditation, this justification extends to them.

One-pointedness and mindfulness practices overlap and enhance each other. Their differences are subtle, but may be clarified by comparing the breath flowing in and out with a saw cutting a log: If one focuses on the exact point the saw’s teeth contact the log, this is analogous to a narrow form of *one-pointedness* (of the breath where it enters/exits the nostrils), whereas *mindfulness* is paying attention to all the details present at that narrow focal point (each saw-tooth cutting the log, its sound, its vibration and scent, and so on) (Rose 2009/2010).

One-pointedness involves controlling the target-scope of attention and training it to one precise thing, whereas mindfulness is the observing attention within that narrow target-scope; the former is like a camera lens, adjustable to a narrow radius or “zoom-lens” function, and the latter is the function of looking at what is visible within that narrow radius. By holding the aim and

scope of attention on one-point, one is better able to deeply examine what is going on at that point, and vice versa, so practicing either contributes some skill-development to the other.

These are representative *meditation* techniques, and there are many others, but most are variations on these. There are many other kinds of *contemplative* exercises, such as relaxation techniques, visualization and other imagination-invoking simulation exercises, and, among others, writing exercises. A relaxation exercise might involve progressive, systematic tensing and releasing of muscles throughout the body. Visualization might involve imagining what it is like to be the character one is about to role-play, a calm sea, or any other image, entity, process, or state that one wants to simulate. In free-writing, thoughts are written down spontaneously and without editing, to let loose the floodgates of creative thought and “go meta” on them afterwards. All these techniques involve reframing the parameters of conscious experience in some way that fosters brainstorming, going meta, and expanding one’s reference. They are also intrinsically interesting, curiosity-invoking, engaging, and *philosophically-fun* experiences.

Contemplative Pedagogies. Some concrete examples may help illustrate what is meant by “contemplative pedagogy.” In the author’s philosophy classes, the subject matter frequently invites meditative methodologies. So, a “Classical” philosophy instructor who covers both Western and Asian philosophy may expose students to meditation when “covering” the latter. Similarly, a course on 20th Century philosophy might study the method of “imaginative variation” used by Brentano to simulate the removal of all but the essential properties of a thing by imagining variations of it without this or that property and asking whether it would still be itself: A meditative version of this exercise constitutes a distinctive form of contemplative inquiry. The phenomenologist’s method of “bracketing,” where all interpretive dimensions of experience are held at bay (analogous to Cartesian belief-suspension), invites a similar

meditative approach. Similarly, meditation exercises have direct relevance to arguments in the philosophy of mind, for instance, that claim that introspection or other first-personal approaches to philosophy are incoherent; for experiencing meditation first-hand is relevant to evaluating its coherence.

There are many arguments and thought experiments in philosophy that lend themselves to experiential amplification by way of contemplation. For instance, when imagining being a prisoner in Plato's cave, wondering whether we may be dreaming or deceived by an evil Cartesian demon, whether we could be a brain in a vat programmed by a futuristic supercomputer, whether we could be happy in an "experience machine," whether pain is necessarily conscious, whether one would prefer to be the brain or the body after a brain/body-switching experiment, or what it is like to be a bat, it is enriching to raise such questions from within a meditative state.

Topics in philosophy lend themselves to a meditative spin, but subjects such as science, technology, engineering, mathematics, accounting, finance, and business management might not so easily. But a creative instructor can generate content-driven contemplative exercises even in physics, say, about what happens near the speed of light, with time travel, frames of reference, space-time, the multi-verse hypothesis, and so on. Michelle Francl, a chemist at Bryn Mawr, recently presented a webinar on contemplative practices in the science classroom (Francl 2009), and Daniel Barbezat, an economist at Amherst College, has students practice a loving-kindness meditation to test for changes in their self-interest-revealing responses on standard economic surveys, and uses the (positive) results to spark reflection on utilitarian economic assumptions (Barbezat 2009).

It is well known that Descartes, Einstein, and other scientific innovators had "eureka

moments” while engaged in dreams, imaginative visualizations, or other states that share elements in common with those engendered by contemplative practices. Surely, any awareness exercise can help students strengthen attention, any breathing exercise can help them de-stress before an exam, and any reflective writing exercise can help them “go meta” regarding their own learning process – regardless of the discipline. These are all valid reasons to consider adopting a contemplative pedagogy.

In her introductory art survey course, though her peers typically show hundreds of slides per semester, Ziegler displays only one (Wadham 2008). For the first third of the semester, she asks her students repeatedly to describe *what they see*, as opposed to what they think it *means*, or how it makes them *feel*, or what they know about the context in which it was created, and so on. She repeatedly disciplines them in the art of differentiating between observational and interpretive elements. For the second third of the semester, she examines interpretive elements, and in the final third allows a more integrated analysis.

Ziegler claims that this approach develops the basic *methodological skills* of the seasoned art critic. She acknowledges that the traditionally-taught student gains greater informational volume, but concludes that the methodological skills are more valuable, empowering, and lasting. Skinner once said that education is what remains after one has forgotten what one has learned. Here, what methodological skill remains once the details of both kinds of learning have been forgotten is clearly more valuable.

Of course, this invokes the traditional *depth versus coverage* debate, and though ideally students need both (Bransford 1999), in a case of triage depth and skill matter more. Intuitively, this pedagogy of methodological-skills-development cultivates more of an increasingly-functional, user-friendly epistemic framework within which to process/construct new knowledge

than does the pedagogy of information-acquisition, and the development of such skills are more empowering for community college students. The same holds true by analogy with methodological-skills-development pedagogies in most areas of knowledge in which an analogue of meta-level analysis depicted in that single-slide art class is achieved.

This temporally-extended “bare seeing” of art is a visual form of mindfulness meditation called “beholding” (Dustin 2005). Any assignment in any discipline that creates an analogue of beholding promises to yield similar methodological-skills-development outcomes, if even for a few minutes more than or in addition to the time spend discursively engaging the same subject matter. Thus, dwelling on a passage in *lectio divina* style or free-writing whatever thoughts or feelings arise, for the sake of “writing to learn,” are analogues of beholding. Beholding a short film clip, for instance, or an equation, argument, assumption, diagram, or other item might support a meta-analysis in which epistemic/ontological, subjective/objective, intrinsic/extrinsic, and other cognitive distinctions (analogous to Ziegler’s observational/interpretive distinction) are driven home at the level of skill. Most of us have heard of the proverbial professor who basically beholds a single word all semester, or a single concept, assumption, sentence, dilemma, or other intellectual curiosity, and how rich that experience was.

Similarly, football players practice mindfulness, visualization, or mantra (repeating a word or phrase over and over) just to “get into the zone” or anticipate the challenge before engaging in it (Forbes 2004), as do chess masters, actors, musicians, comedians, martial artists, mountain climbers, and other athletes and professionals (Csikszentmihalyi 1991). The teaching of these and/or any related activities that may be enhanced by “zoning in” before engaging in them may all be enhanced by engaging in any of these contemplative exercises, so any college course may benefit from an opening meditation.

Arguments

A calm, clear, focused mind is ideal for teaching and learning, for faculty and students. Such a mind is intrinsically philosophical, not in the dialectical/Socratic sense familiar in the West, but in the sense involved with contacting the deeper ground of being within one's own experience – what may be called the contemplative *mood*. Putting students in touch with a philosophically vital but non-discursive dimension of being is intuitively interesting and worthwhile.

Classes that meditate together and engage in other contemplative exercises create safe spaces for opening up that are normally unavailable to the highly-stressed, inhibited community college student. Having students “go meta” in a meditation about why they are in the course, or in college, or about what their future looks like with degree in hand can only help, as most community college students, especially liberal arts majors, are confused about such matters, and find little support for them in the standard curriculum. Most faculty resistant to or uninterested in innovative pedagogy assume that prepared and motivated students learn regardless of which pedagogical styles an instructor employs, and the unprepared and unmotivated will not learn no matter what pedagogy modulates their educational experience. All indicators seem to suggest, however, that contemplative pedagogies make a real difference.

Professors who set time aside for slow, reflective, contemplative inquiry, who create spaces for safe, creative inquiry unavailable under the informational model, and who demonstrate a commitment to depth over coverage send an implicit but powerful message to students: that they *care*. The environmental “field” and group dynamics that these factors make possible help to sustain not only student-centered learning, but motivated teaching. The professor who meditates with her students is not only supporting her students, but herself, against

teacher demotivation, burnout, cynicism, and other ills that more pressingly threaten the community college instructor.

One challenge that must be addressed, however, involves student resistance. Some religious students see meditation on a list of prohibited “occult” activities. Others resist because meditation has odd connotations. Thus, it is useful before the first meditation to emphasize that while there are spiritual forms of meditation practice those are not used in class, that there are (secular) *awareness exercises* such as mindfulness, that athletes and other professionals use them to “get into the zone” (Forbes 2004), and that those not interested may treat it as time to relax and recharge batteries, time for a “conscious nap.” Persistently-reluctant religious students may be instructed to meditate in whatever way is consistent with their beliefs, say, to pray. Those who cannot meditate (say, they are oppositional or too anxious) may be asked to sit still, quietly respecting the class, using this time to reflect on the subject matter they are currently studying.

Of the thousands of students the author has taught meditation, he can count on one hand the students who have refused to participate. These odds “speak volumes,” all things considered: If the odds were that great for engaging students in class discussions, note-taking, doing the readings, or other basic learning activities, faculty would rejoice.

Objections. Robert Nozick raises an interesting objection to the validity of the meditative state (1981): Absent belief in a supramundane reality of the sort posited by the Hindu or Buddhist, the meditative mind is just the brain on idle, so to speak. Applying this to the classroom, one could argue that community college students’ brains are already idling too much. Gilbert Ryle raised an objection to the notion of an introspective state (1949): The idea that one can passively observe one’s mind without interfering with it is contradictory, for one cannot passively observe oneself in a state of rage – either the rage has to go, or the passive observation.

Applying this to the classroom, one could argue that the notions of mindfulness and the like are incoherent – the last thing we would want to foist upon our students.

Replies. The majority of the by-now well-known benefits of meditation are empirically verified independently of supramundane belief systems, and students' minds are better described as suffering from something opposite of idling, akin to attention-deficit disorder – that is, rather than idling quietly, ready to learn, they are scattered all over the place, and have extremely short attention spans. *Attention-training* is precisely what they need, James would claim, so as to be able to enter a lesson or other class activity idling, ready to devote sustained attention to learning. Contemplative practices provide elements of that training. It is precisely because the meditative element in the mind interferes with the overall mental state that meditation *works* – that it is able to bring about all those wholesome changes. Thus, by bringing students into a calm, clear, curiously-attentive meditative state, we are precisely able to reduce student agitation, confusion, disinterest and distraction.

Research. Numerous scientific studies attest to the interest- and attention-enhancing (Lau 2006; Wallace 2006; Lutz, Slagter, and others 2008), stress-reducing (Benson 1975; Benson and Stark 1997), and related cognitive and affective properties of meditation practices (Davidson 2003), that these practices have a positive impact on high school students (Benson 1994), college students (Deckro 2002), and on learning (Bransford 1999), and that they increase neuroplasticity and brain power (Begley 2007). A recent, comprehensive review of research on the effects of meditation on learning reports positive results regarding cognitive/academic performance and general functioning: Mindfulness improves ability to maintain preparedness, orient attention, process information quickly/accurately, handle stress, regulate emotional reactions and cultivate positive psychological states; one-pointedness practice has “a positive impact on academic

achievement”; and meditation enhances creativity, social skills, and empathetic responses (Shapiro 2008, 4).

Regarding the ability to maintain preparedness, for instance, Kasulis summarizes research on *Zen* practitioners (Naranjo 1971, 196), indicating their ceaseless responsiveness to repeated stimuli that the ordinary mind normally screens off (1985, n.3 to chapter 9). Clearly, the contemplative mind is anything but *dull* while “idling,” but alive to the subtlest nuances even of repetitive experience – a clear virtue for any student. Regarding orienting attention and regulating emotion, studies conducted using the Toronto Mindfulness Scale (TMS) (Lau 2006) indicate that repeated practice of mindfulness increasingly engenders intrinsic interest, heightened attention, and detachment (“being centered”) – what Ryle thought incompatible with rage. Intrinsically-interested, highly-attentive, emotionally-centered students are ideal students in any college course, but in greater demand in community colleges.

And regarding cultivating empathic responses, studies on the brains of long-term “loving-kindness” meditation practitioners reveal both more neural matter and more syntactic activity in the empathy centers of the brain (Lutz, Brefczynski-Lewis, and others 2008), and regarding increased cognitive/academic performance, studies on the brains of long-term mindfulness practitioners reveal similar results regarding the neural circuitry of attention (Lutz, Slagter, and others 2008). The proverbial virtues of the meditative mind are not “all in the mind,” but also “all in the brain.” Contemplative neuroscience is revealing a host of learning-related neuroplasticities connected with meditative practices (Begley 2007).

Science-of-learning research reveals that metacognitive activities – activities that loop reflectively back on themselves, such as thinking about thought, wanting to have other wants, and so on – are essential to the sort of self-regulation that supports ideal learning (Bransford

1999). Since contemplative practices are metacognitive *training* exercises *par excellence*, it follows that they are essential to successful learning.

More important from a practical perspective are the stress-reducing effects of these simple exercises. In addition to the stress studies mentioned above, two colleagues running informal experiments, exposing only one of two otherwise-equal course sections to a simple two-minute breath-meditation exercise before an exam, claim that students exposed to the meditation before exams scored statistically-significantly higher than those in the control groups, indicating a relationship between the centering effects of the practice and cognitive performance.

Formal research on the author's philosophy students also shows statistically-significant positive increases in philosophical and educational attitudes as a result of increased exposure to in-class mindfulness and one-pointedness exercises. Interestingly, those philosophy classes that only practiced meditation five times, for instance, did not show significant results on the TMS, which tracks post-meditation responses to statements about attentiveness, centering, and so on, but they did show significant results across the pre- and post-course philosophical/educational attitude questionnaires. This shows that the meditation had significant long-term effects on them that they were unaware of in the short-term. One effect, among many, involved a shift from an instrumental attitude toward education to an attitude of intrinsic interest; another involved a shift from an attitude of epistemic certainty to one of uncertainty. As a philosophy teacher in a community college, having students seriously reevaluate their life plans and reasons for being in college, and their attitudes toward their own knowledge and beliefs, are core teaching and learning objectives, and – shockingly – they are better served by meditation than by Socratic dialogue, another Archimedean point.

Suggestions

The best thing a faculty member can do to support the adoption of a contemplative pedagogy is to begin a contemplative practice in her own life, even if all that entails is sitting quietly for a few minutes before leaving the office and heading to class. For, as a famous contemplative adage has it, *one who is not still cannot impart stillness to others*. Another idea would be to try to set up a faculty interest group where faculty meet and share resources, best practices, practice meditation together, and perhaps read each other's contemplative scholarship. Some college's centers for teaching and learning support the facilitators of faculty interest groups with release time or a stipend. Some faculty lead college-wide weekly meditations open to faculty, staff, and students, fostering an inclusive contemplative community that cuts across hierarchical lines.

Anyone interested in contemplative pedagogy training ought to consider attending a contemplative pedagogy seminar with CACE (www.naropa.edu/cace) or CCMS (www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/summer.html), or a contemplative pedagogy convention with ACMHE (www.acmhe.org). Combined, the CCMS and ACMHE websites offer a variety of resources for contemplative scholars: webinars, blog forums, bibliographies, downloadable articles, syllabi, assignments, audio meditations and a host of useful tools.

In the articles that follow, there are more specific examples of contemplative pedagogies, practices, and assignments, as well as the sharing of best practices. The first thing someone interested in contemplative pedagogy should do is to read them carefully.

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