The Summer Session has grown over the years to serve 40 participants, which means that introductions during the opening circle have taken on the qualities of a “Zen exercise” in brevity. One-two sentences each, to say name, department, institution, and, at Mirabai Bush’s request, “Why you really came.”

The invitation to go directly to the essence of the matter started the group off well for a week of extraordinarily honest and engaged connection. Participants came seeking “tools to help student’s wake up,” “put heart into teaching,” “to be with others who are thinking and feeling contemplatively,” as well as “to escape from the Texas sun.”

The week’s presentations and conversations take place in an environment quite different from that of the first Summer Session. There is a new openness to and interest in contemplative approaches, from community colleges to top tier research institutions. During Arthur Zajonc’s opening talk, he gave an overview of the Center’s work, including two new initiatives in contemplative leadership education at Harvard/MIT and teacher education in Israel, where he hopes the Center’s involvement can make a positive contribution to a tremendously challenging situation. Quoting Maria Montessori, he remarked, “Preventing conflict is the work of politics; peace is the work of education.”

All these activities are meant to serve students, faculty and institutions by providing support for greater contemplative awareness.

A clearer rationale for the inclusion of contemplative approaches to teaching and learning is emerging, supported by research in psychology and neuroscience. Contemplative methods strengthen attention and emotional stability and cultivate empathy, altruism and compassion, enhancing the service orientation of students. Contemplative practice can be a mode of inquiry, deepening student engagement as they delve into poetry or the observation of natural phenomena. The inclusion of practice is valid across disciplines for general use, and relevant to course specific content. (See Appendix 1, Selected Bibliography: The Science of Meditation for sources.)
In the first evening presentation, Joel Upton, Professor of Art and Art History at Amherst College, offered “Contemplating Monet’s painting Matinée sur la Seine,” a course specific contemplative encounter with a “stupendous work of art.”

He asked the group to be as present as possible with the image, painted by Claude Monet on the left bank of the Seine near Giverney, in 1897. If we were in the Mead Art Museum at Amherst College, where the painting now hangs, he would suggest we approach with reverence, quietly open and vulnerable. To move in close, where the brush strokes become visible, and move away, observing how the painting changes.

Up close, the brush strokes appear chaotic, but from a distance resolve into an impressionistic scene. These are just the beginning of a long litany of contradictory elements Joel draws to our attention: chromatic contrast between light and dark, a pull between horizontal and vertical, near and far, asymmetry and symmetry, presence and absence.

The artist, Joel suggests, creates out of these fundamental tensions, toward “an intimation of the reconciliation of contradictory reality.” From the primacy of the nearly meditative encounter with the work, he moves on to the history, iconography, and more conventional “ways of knowing” the painting, but these investigations are all informed by the prior experience. In the thrall of his contemplation of the painting, Joel finds he can nearly hear the artist’s own voice speaking, quietly: “be well, have joy, be at peace.”

Each morning of the summer session began with meditation and movement in the Crew House (now a dance studio) on Paradise Pond. The morning after Joel’s presentation, the view of the water, in the morning atmosphere, evoked a similar sense of tranquility. After quietly sitting together, Yin Mei led a series of movements adapted from Tai Chi and Qi Gong, in her own wonderful way. Refreshed and uplifted, the group walked through the gardens to the library’s browsing room for the morning program.
Judith Simmer Brown is Professor of Religious Studies at Naropa University, an institution, as she put it, “founded by some very brave people in 1974.” She began her talk, “First Thought: Trusting Freshness in Academic Pursuits,” by saying that she went first to Naropa as a student. After teaching at the University of Western Washington for some years, she was looking at how to do things differently in the classroom. Naropa, at the time, was quite experimental—a kind of petri dish—that often blurred the distinction between a dharma center and a university. Some of the experiments that succeeded had to do with developing “fresh mind,” opened by meditation, into the classroom. She was curious whether a certain state of mind could bring fresh thoughts, a kind of “sky in which clouds arise” or “ocean in which waves arise,” bringing one into the present moment and opening the possibility of creativity.

Some of the practices developed included “spontaneous poetry,” composed from lines invented on the spot by multiple persons, and an adaptation of lectio divina or sacred reading of poems. This type of reading process supports an encounter in which, rather than “grasp the meaning,” readers “let it dawn” on them. Then they go on to create something out of the experience, such as a line of writing, picture, gesture (dance), or journal entry.

A basic understanding of presence, and a foundation of mindfulness practice is important—fresh thought is not opinion or reaction, or recourse to habitual notions. At Naropa, students are supported by sitting/shamatha classes, so it’s not necessary to include this in the academic classroom, but in a mainstream setting a taste of practice—five minutes or so—would help bring students to the freshness of the present moment before other exercises begin.

Sara Lazar, instructor in the Department of Psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, as well as a scientist at the Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center’s Mind/Body Medical Institute and an Assistant in Psychiatry in the Department of Psychiatry at Massachusetts General Hospital, presented “Meditation and the Brain,” a talk that 10 years ago would not have been possible.

“What is meditation?” she asked. It looks like nothing. But with neuroscience instruments a great deal of mental activity can be observed. Just as physical exercise
is good for the body, the focused attention (on mantra breathing, etc.) has benefits for the brain.

The studies Sara presented were primarily based on subjects who practiced Vipassana, or insight meditation, a form of mindfulness defined as focus on the breath, in the present moment, without judgment. Early studies reported effects such as states of calm, well-being, and an increased capacity for attention, memory and managing emotion.

What happens in the brain when you meditate? Increased gamma activity (brain waves) connect the limbic system to the cerebral cortex, reinforcing the mind-body connection. The amygdala (associated with the “flight or fight” response) is less active. In stressful environments, for example, the amygdala grows.

Meditation also affects the structure of the brain. Volume (grey matter) differences among taxi drivers, bilinguals, musicians and jugglers can be seen in areas of the brain associated with specific activity. Jugglers, for example, have increased volume in the area of the brain involved in detecting visual motion. The regions of the brain affected by meditation are the insula (associated with integrating thoughts, senses and emotion), and the pre-frontal cortex (working memory, attention, emotion regulation and moral decision-making).

Practitioners of Mindfulness-Based-Stress Reduction (MBSR) had “increased density” (i.e. their brains grew) in those regions after only 8 weeks of practice. There was also increased density in the hippocampus, associated with learning and memory; the TPJ, linked to perspective taking; and the PCC, involved with “self” processing.

Although few may be motivated to meditate by the promise of a bigger brain, these effects are an important step in understanding the complex of benefits for those who practice and the world in which they live.

Daniel Barbezat, Professor of Economics at Amherst College, introduced his presentation on “The Paradox of Self-Control” with his own admission that paradox, and living in contradiction is not easy. It’s often unpleasant. On this particular morning, Dan had been preparing to say farewell to his youngest child upon her departure to college. He stood before the group sad, happy and confused. Sad to say goodbye, happy for her
independence, confused about whether he wanted to be here or home and wondering what it all means. This, he asserted, is what economics is like.

One way to reduce scarcity, he began, is to “get more stuff.” Another is to want less. To understand supply and demand, Dan finds it essential to look at our wanting. Without understanding wanting, he remarked, we can’t understand scarcity.

In his economics classroom, he invites his students to examine, “What is your deepest, truest wanting?” This identification of preferences is at the heart of economics. Wanting arises constantly and is simultaneously contradictory. The paradox is you can’t always get what you want, not least because your wants themselves are often in conflict.

He engages students in an exercise, without giving much context, and only afterward presents the theoretical models that demonstrate economic behavior. In this way, they can see if their own experience maps (or not) with the theory. While as a teacher, he can’t control the outcomes in this process, he respects the integrity of this approach and finds the degree to which “students are sovereign to their own experience” make it worth the risks involved.

He asks them, (and the group of before him by proxy) to write down a list of things they would be better off doing less of, and to “notice whatever arises” when listing these things. He instructs us to choose one with resonance, and “consider, if you had less of this, you’d be better off— how so? What would you have if you had less of this thing? And, if you had that thing, then what would you have? Allow these thoughts to swirl and settle, and then let them go. Allow space for writing, and write what you feel in your body (first), emotions (next) and finally what you think.”

After this process is complete, he asks his students to commit to an action that moves them one step closer to limiting the thing or action they’d be better off with less of—for the next three days (not for the rest of their lives). This is to be understood as an opportunity to do something that they themselves have just determined they will benefit from. Then, they can note any emotion there is when making the commitment. To wrap things up, he asks them to look back at what they most deeply want, and consider that they should do what they most deeply want.

The exercise suggests that our choices are often predicated on emotion, physicality and the conditioning of thought, and reveal conflicts between our valuation of immediate and delayed rewards—the opposition of what Dan calls the “rational” and the “demon” self, and economic theory refers to as the long-term and short-term self. Economics takes the long-term self to be the “real” self, granting to it the authority to make rules for the short-term self, and convincing it that it’s better to act on its behalf.

Now he can bring out the models that show discounting functions, and “choice to future allocation” questions, and students have a basis for understanding that is rooted in their own experience of the complexity of their wanting. They come away with a heightened awareness of the ways in which they are wired—to consume, to
value—and the extent to which their decisions are not fully their own. This kind of
exercise certainly informs their comprehension of the course material, and it may
ultimately affect their own behavior.

Over the past few years there has been a growing interest in issues of diversity and
social justice at Summer Sessions. This year a workshop began to formulate the
questions and consider what a contemplative perspective could bring. Embracing our
Social Identities: A Path Towards Liberation, led by Rose Sackey-Milligan, Katja
Hahn-d’Errico and Mirabai Bush was an exploratory conversation on the
construction of social identity and how practice might be helpful in understanding the
layers, both external and internal. Social Justice theory has typically concentrated on
the exterior identities of privilege and target groups. Using storytelling and deep
listening practices, participants spoke in small groups to the prompt of “The first time I
recognized I was (fill in the blank with a particular identity).”

Linda-Susan Beard, Professor of English at Bryn Mawr College began her presentation
“Waiting,” with music, with her eyes closed. Having just finished a
session on bringing social identity and contemplative practice
together, the participants were in various states of arrival. She waited.

Linda Susan related her interest in talking about waiting, which she considers a key
element of contemplative pedagogy. She spoke at Antioch College in Yellow Springs,
Ohio earlier this year for their “Green Space for the Mind” symposium, which
investigated the premise that conventional instruction based on critical scholarship
and the scientific method can be strengthened by incorporating reflective,
contemplative and experiential methods.

When asked how to combine social justice activism and contemplation, Linda Susan
answered, “With waiting, followed by listening, hearing, looking, seeing, cultivating
intellectual humility, as preparation for contemplata tradere (the motto of the
Dominican order for “taking the fruits out into the world”).
Patricia Wallace, Professor of English at Vassar College, has been active in campus wide developments that provide resources for faculty to use beneficial practices across disciplines. During her morning presentation at the Summer Session, she discussed her poetry writing course, in which she asks her students to learn by heart a poem of their choice. She finds it useful for training their ear, and as a method of discovery. So much of the meaning of the poem comes out in how you say it from memory.

Since she had asked participants to prepare a line or short poem themselves, she invited small groups to spend 15 minutes speaking, listening and being present to one another, just as she does in her classes.

The speaking and listening is conducted “like a Quaker Meeting.” First say the poem (or line of poetry), then the title and author’s name. No commentary—she insists—“the thing you have to say is in the saying of the poem.”

A similar exercise can also work well with longer texts. In a course on JD Salinger she asks students to come to class with one sentence (from the book, not the critical material). They speak, the others listen, and then sit in silence to let settle. She finds this opening gives students who may be nervous about speaking in class a way to contribute their voices. It both reveals and protects.

Learning in this way is anything but rote: it cultivates attention and a kind of intimacy; a “going out to meet, emptying out to let in, and allowing space for the way the words speak in the heart.”

Understanding poetry, Pat suggests, is not about explaining everything. It’s a process, and is built up out of “partial understanding (which is real understanding).” When asked about the role of assessment in her courses, Pat responded that a creative reimagining is called for, and that “we who are good at that need to be part of this conversation, which may have been dominated by some with rigid and reductionist views.”

Attention is a skill that can be developed and practiced. Simone Weill considered that the single most important thing in education is “to see things truly, to see what is” and asserted that this effort “is never fruitless.” Iris Murdoch defined attention as “patient and loving regard,” an attitude that Pat finds well cultivated when reading student work. Judgment “closes” the space while patience “allows the opening to hold.” Loving regard, Pat relates, is not sentimental or lacking in rigor. It can be exacting,
seeing clearly, but gently. This kind of patience is a point of aspiration for her, to hold in her heart and communicate to her students.

At Friday’s closing oval (to be precise), each person was invited to say something, and the quality of patient and loving regard for one another’s words was strongly present. Participants expressed appreciation “for the opportunity to connect what we’re doing to what really matters, and to each other, which is often foreclosed because of the heaviness of institutions,” “for feeling affirmed in my work, and psyched to see what I can do with my kids this year,” for a “community of people who are a reflection of who I am,” and “for the ephemeral beauty, like a Tibetan sand painting, of our coming together and saying goodbye.”
Appendix I

The Science of Meditation

Selected Bibliography


9. MBSR studies are available through the Center for Mindfulness at the Univ. of Massachusetts website, http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/research/findings.cfm


