

Eighth Annual Summer Session on Contemplative Pedagogy

July 29 – August 3, 2012

Smith College, Northampton, MA



Arthur Zajonc and Daniel Barbezat

As an interdisciplinary exploration of how contemplative approaches serve the classroom, Summer Sessions have always brought together a group of educators diverse across discipline, department and institution. This year, leading departmental affiliations and research interests were Law, Social Justice and Environmentalism, but also included Medieval studies, Art, Pharmacology and Landscape Architecture: a kaleidoscope of lenses trained on the world.

In 2012, the session expanded to include higher education professionals working outside the classroom, in writing centers, counseling, and technology, further increasing the variety of perspectives. We had 12 participants in these roles, drawn by their interest in applying contemplative methods and compassion to administrative responsibilities and work with students outside the classroom.

The expanded reach to those working in all facets of higher education resulted in an expansion of the number of participants served, nearly doubling the size with 60 attending and 10 faculty and staff.

Expansion through inclusion: across practice traditions; ethnicities and race; institutions and positions within higher education became a prominent focus for 2012 (and beyond) with new leadership from Executive Director Daniel Barbezat. While diversity had long been an organizational concern, the intention for inclusion, and to better understand the barriers to connection across difference, was strengthened and deepened under Barbezat, with particular support from Board Chair Rhonda Magee. And this year's Summer Session was able to serve a group that included a higher proportion of diverse participants than in prior years, with 25% non-white participants.

Although a few applications were submitted in advance of the announcement of the Center's diversity focus, the Contemplative Mind session on "Diversity and Inclusion" at April's International Symposia on Contemplative Studies (ISCS) in Denver and the theme of September's Annual Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education (ACMHE) Conference: "Contemplative Approaches in the Diverse Academic Community" were displayed during the application period and may have encouraged more diverse prospective participants. The diversity focus directly informed two program elements of the Summer Session: an evening on "Contemplative Communication" and a Multicultural Identities Workshop, both led by Dan Barbezat and Rhonda Magee. Indirectly, the Summer Session allowed for multiple opportunities to develop and practice capacities to communicate across difference in ways that maintain connection and deepen trust.

The contemplative learning community that was created at the Summer Session demonstrated in many ways how these approaches support a framework for establishing meaningful connections with colleagues.

Through the application materials they submit, we learn about participants' relative experience with contemplative methods and the questions they hope to explore. At this stage in the development and implementation of contemplative approaches, we find most applicants have established a personal contemplative practice and many are already experimenting with methods in their classrooms and campus work. They come to the Summer Session to deepen understanding, refine plans for integrating practice toward particular goals and develop more systematic and embedded approaches. The formal program of practice sessions, presentations and workshops provides the scaffold for their further investigation. They find their inquiry is also served by the caring community of colleagues they find themselves within.



Meditation circle in Neilson Browsing Room

Each morning begins with practice, and over the week faculty offered a range of sitting meditation exercises, which were followed by contemplative movement sessions with **Yin Mei Critchell**, director, dancer, choreographer and Professor of Dance in the Drama, Theater and Dance department at Queen's College, CUNY. Yin Mei led participants through a deep and intuitive Tai Chi/ Qi Gong practice, attuning awareness to the space within and around.

Arthur Zajonc, former director of the Center and now president of the Mind & Life Institute, gave the opening presentation. His overview of the design principles of contemplative pedagogy is informed by his long-term involvement in contemplative practice, research and teaching as the leading proponent for the inclusion of the contemplative dimension in higher education. He displayed recent research in psychology and neuroscience demonstrating the benefits of



contemplative approaches and suggested that the inclusion of practice is valid across disciplines for strengthening attention and emotional stability and cultivating empathy, altruism and compassion. Zajonc also discussed how contemplative exercises are an effective mode of inquiry relevant to course content, providing examples from a first-year seminar and the physics courses he taught at Amherst College that showed how the exercises deepened students' engagement as they delved into poetry, observed natural phenomena, and considered the contradictions of their own identity.

Toward the end of the Summer Session, Zajonc offered “Contemplative Inquiry as a Research Method,” a workshop which invited participants to take inventory of the types of exercises and approaches they’d experienced over the week, and to select one to develop for some specific course content or need on campus.

A range of morning presentations from other Summer Session faculty, summarized by the presenter, appear under the headings below.

Person/Planet: Contemplative Environmental Studies

Paul Wapner, Professor of Global Environmental Politics at the School of International Service, American University

I introduced the concept of “Contemplative Environmental Studies” (CES) as the attempt by professors in various fields to use contemplative traditions and practices to investigate and teach about environmental issues. The emerging discipline arose out of the real-life concern for teaching, researching, and living in an age of severe environmental intensification. Given



increasing environmental hazards—especially climate change, loss of biological diversity, fresh water scarcity, and energy challenges—how can we best teach our students, conduct meaningful research, and live environmentally responsible lives? CES wrestles with such questions.

CES starts from the assumption that contemplative practices can open up the inner lives of students, and that development of one’s inner life can assist in confronting environmental dangers. We know, for example, that mindfulness practices can assist people in developing an ability to respond—rather than simply react—to circumstances. This is a useful capability in those facing environmental challenges since it leads to skillful political engagement wherein one can more calmly assess various engagement strategies. Likewise, contemplative traditions that emphasize engaging in the world without getting caught in worldly rewards also offer an essential asset to environmental citizenship. Many traditions call on practitioners to work tirelessly to make the world a better place, but to give up the fruits of one’s efforts. Finally, almost all contemplative traditions offer expanded time and space horizons for thinking about our lives and the fate of all life. For example, the concept of “deep time” or “seventh generation thinking” reminds us to adopt a long view when confronting environmental challenges, and the idea of ecological and existential “interdependence” as well as “inter-being” offer meaningful ways to think about human identity and the grounds for action.

In addition to focusing on how inner growth can help us engage environmental issues, CES also recognizes that working with environmental challenges enhances our inner lives. The environmental problems we currently face are of a unique magnitude and intensity. As such, they offer novel ways to deepen experience. For example, one could argue that humanity is now capable of experiencing a level of species sadness that has been inaccessible to previous generations. To know that the earth’s ecological fabric is fraying at alarming rates, and to know that we, as a species, are responsible, is opening up new chambers within the human heart wherein a deep sadness is emerging. Likewise, as

the more-than-human world shrinks in the throes of massive extinction, many of us are feeling a deeper love for the wider family of life around us, and this may, in fact, be a new inner experience for humanity itself. To put it simply, exterior engagement with environmental issues is opening up new dimensions of humanity's inner experience, and focusing on the interface between external and internal ecologies is essential to CES.

In this presentation I explained how CES is influencing my research and teaching. For instance, my current research focuses on "climate suffering." No matter how much we try to avoid (mitigate) and adjust (adapt) to climate change, there will nevertheless be inevitable suffering. (There already is.) My latest project examines how people are experiencing weather-related hardships associated with climate change such as unseasonable floods, record droughts and fires, melting permafrost, and the like. The premise of the research is that suffering is not itself predestined, but is the consequence of pain (which is inescapable) plus resistance to pain (which is variable). I want to know the ways people are utilizing different narratives to make sense of their pain, and how these constitute varying degrees and qualities of resistance.

In terms of teaching, I am using contemplative practices in a number of my courses, and utilizing them in workshops I have been offering to colleagues. Over the past decade, I have taught two courses that are directly relevant: "Contemplation and Political Change," and "Contemplative Sustainable Design." In both courses I use contemplative practices to deepen students' inner experience of themselves and course material, and awaken them to the metaphors implicit in different contemplative techniques. For example, I use yoga to bring awareness to our bodies, and encourage embodied kinds of knowing. In this sense, I encourage students to work with obstacles that they face in their research by experiencing obstacles in their bodies. This involves inviting students to come to an edge in yoga—a place where they meet physical resistance—and investigate how they work with such an edge. Does one burst through, back-off from, or play with the ambiguities of resistance? I also use yoga as a metaphor to enhance intellectual flexibility. All of us suffer from "hardening of the categories." Yoga introduces the importance and offers the rewards of physical, emotional, and intellectual flexibility.

I also use meditation in my courses. I do this instrumentally to bring student awareness squarely into the classroom, and to develop an ability to look directly into difficult situations. Students often have a hard time transitioning to the classroom. Meditation provides the experience of letting go of previous preoccupations and future planning, and bringing one's fuller self to the classroom. Additionally, meditation provides practice in confronting discomfort. Environmental tragedies are emotionally challenging simply to know about, let alone try to address. Meditation enables us to use choreographer, Liz Lerman's axiom of "turning discomfort into inquiry." Meditation allows students to find the confidence to turn their gaze toward even the most discomforting environmental injustices and conditions.

In my presentation, I shared the virtues and challenges of teaching using contemplative practices. In terms of challenges, I discussed how such practices can come-off sounding corny or religious, and described instances when students resisted contemplative education, and how I dealt with it. My intention in doing so was to be honest about my own limitations in using contemplative pedagogy, and remind people that doing so requires some inner work on the part of the professor.

I finished by using a contemplative orientation to explain the origins of environmental degradation. People don't solve environmental problems, they displace them. For instance, they export waste to poorer regions, or leave it for future generations, or allow it to contaminate and injure the habitat of other creatures. I pointed out that such practices are not simply matters of ignorance, but represent a type of moral blindness that has to do with defining "others" as less fully deserving of ethical treatment. As long as we are able to look at others as inferior to ourselves, we will continue to displace environmental problems rather than take full responsibility for them. I explained how contemplative traditions and practices heighten our moral sensitivities, and thus enable us to address the challenge of living sustainably in a more responsible manner.

In short, I attempted to explain and demonstrate the critical significance of introducing contemplative sensitivities and practices into environmental research and teaching, with the assumption that doing so also enhances our abilities—as professors, citizens, and ordinary human beings—to live more meaningful lives in the face of grave environmental dangers.

Uses of Ritual in Contemplative Education

Lorilai Biernacki, Associate Professor of Religious Studies at the University of Colorado

When using contemplative practices in educational settings, ritual can help to ground the exercises both in and out of the classroom. Ritual reminds us that we are embodied. In this presentation I discussed our culture's predominant tendency towards taking the learning process to be an exercise in objectification, making what we study into an object and then treating it as mere object, something to master, rather than a process of learning that also stimulates a sense of a subjective understanding of what we study. Obviously, learning is more complex than a merely bimodal process, and this as a heuristic device is one that suffers from the risk of oversimplification, yet, as a device it is useful in suggesting a balance to what is often a lopsided process in our educational system.

So, what exactly is ritual? Nearly always understood to be closely aligned with religion—even more than it is aligned with, say spirituality or with mysticism, ritual reaches down into a level of humanity that runs deeper than our conscious, egoic selves. Roy Rappaport, a scholar of ritual writes of "ritual as humanity's basic social act" (*Ritual and Religion* p.107). That is, ritual connects to others beyond ourselves at a very basic level.

The repetition of ritual functions on a level beyond the cognitive; it acts as a kind of rhythm that allows access to deeper emotional realities. This is something that Robert Bellah notes in his recent book, *Religion and Human Evolution*, namely that the repetition of ritual—redundancy helps humans to move from indexical to symbolic meaning, and suggests that is what helped early humans to develop language. My own sense is that rituals, which move out of the semantic field through use of embodiment, use basic elements such as water, with rhythm and repetition, connect us to the being we already know but have buried deep within us. From my own sort of panentheistic perspective, connecting us to a recapitulation of our evolutionary pasts.

A number of points to consider regarding ritual:

- 1) Ritual typically requires repetition to become effective—if you choose to incorporate ritual in a classroom or other setting, it's a good idea to establish the ritual you will use as a routine in your own

life prior to beginning it with others. It doesn't have to be time-consuming; it just needs daily repetition.

2) My own experience is that the use of basic elements and forces, fire, water, breath, the classic elements we see in most ancient mystical scriptural texts, certainly in India, with which I am most familiar--can add a boost to the process of meditation and ritual, and take up the slack where our repetition is less.

3) Using implements that are not culturally familiar is actually sometimes helpful in a classroom because it helps to generate a space outside of ordinary consciousness. So checking our email or Facebook accounts regularly counts as a kind of ritual repetition, however it does not engender a kind of sacred, non-ordinary space (also apart from the fact that it separates a group by linking us primarily to people not present).

4) Maybe most important: by allowing us to access a pre-linguistic, a gestural layer of our history as human species, it allows us to step outside of a strictly objective, and objectifying approach to learning. While an objectifying perspective is necessary for learning, much more can be gained by complimenting this with subjective experience, as the 11th century Indian philosopher Abhinavagupta points out.

Practical Exercises:

1: the use of a vow in the classroom. I have used this practice teaching Gandhi; it is a practice he often engaged. In my use, we took a few different vows. One was a vow to speak the truth (following Gandhi) for just one semester, and we took another vow, anything each student wished to positively transform about him or herself.

For this classroom practice I implemented a ritualistic component derived from general Indian practice of making vows. We used water as an element in making the vow. The person making the vow holds water in his or her hand while pronouncing the vow and lets the water fall to the earth on the completion. Water, which is a ubiquitous substance, making up 90% of our bodies, is in a sense a reminder, a kind of witness to our statements. My theory is that the ritual, embodied expression of intention towards transformation, through the embodiment, calls forth some deeper part of oneself that meets us and helps with our transformation.

2. The second example is a modification of an Indian tantric practice called "bhuta shuddhi," or purifying the material elements. This is mostly done mentally in Indian practice, and comes in a variety of versions.

A basic template employs the 5 elements arranged in order of gross or solid to subtle: Earth, Water, Fire, Breath, Air and Space. One mentally imagines each of the elements within one's physical body to be dissolved into the next more subtle component.

In some Tantric versions sound is used with this as well, syllables called seed sounds, *bija mantra*:

Lam with earth; Vam with water; Ram with fire; Yam with air; Ham with space

Some versions of this work on the bodily centers called the cakras, associating the 5 elements with different sources. Many of my medieval textual sources don't follow this method, but instead imaginatively destroy and rebuild the body. I like to adapt this model to a 21st century context by looking at its basic impetus as a method for redefining identity. One way to do this is to consider the disciplines in a university. Can we arrange them on a continuum from most matter-centered to most consciousness/spirit centered—i.e., identity as constructed from most gross, most physical to most subtle? This is fundamentally what we see in the Indian discussions of the 5 elements, the bhutas, they are understood to be us in our 5 layers from most matter/physically oriented—*earth*, to most consciousness, spirit oriented—*space*.

So I represent the disciplines from religion, philosophy—concerned with ideas of spirit, through psychology, sociology, anthropology, with mind, through biology, the body to chemistry, a more material understanding of ourselves, to physics as the basic constituents of matter.

And what's fun about late 20th and 21st century physics is that the discovery of the very tiny, subtle particles in quantum mechanics and string theory almost start to bring us back to the heart of religion and philosophy. So students often interpret this as a kind of wonder of the cosmos, that our basic essence as matter in physics starts to align with our essence as spirit in religion.

Again successively, from matter to spirit or spirit to matter. The point of the process is to progressively reconfigure our identities so that they become less fixed in a sense, which then allows for an open space. I think of this actually as wonder, which allows for a subjective entrance into a topic. My conjecture is that the place of pure space allows the presence of the other to be a subjective experience. Using the process of moving from one element to the next enables the shifts in consciousness that allows us to reconfigure identity.

Living Contemplative Pedagogy: A Conversation

Veta Goler joined with **Dan Barbezat** to share their own experiences of bringing contemplative practices to their academic institutions. Goler focused her comments on how, over the last two decades, personal growth as a contemplative individual has dovetailed with aspects of Spelman College's institutional transformation. Contemplative practices are now found in curricular and co-curricular contexts on campus, a growing number of faculty express interest in contemplative pedagogy and articulate the value of reflection and other contemplative experiences in preparing Spelman women to be effective change agents in the world.



One of the goals in Goler's teaching is to help students expand their ways of knowing by deepening their capacity to see and then use this new "sight" to enhance what they know intellectually. Employing a contemplative drawing experience from a conference, she developed the following Contemplative Seeing and Knowing Exercise, and introduced the practice at the Summer Session with the hope that participants would find ways to use this exercise in their own institutions.

Contemplative Seeing and Knowing Exercise

Veta Goler, Coordinator for Arts and Humanities and Associate Professor of Dance at Spelman College

Allow 20-40 minutes. With more time, lengthen time to journal and share.

Preparation: Each person has 2 sheets of paper (copy paper is good) and a pen or pencil. Participants arrange themselves in pairs, sitting close to each other, face-to-face. They take a moment to breathe deeply and settle.

Lead participants to:

Write what they know about their partner and what they'd like to know (questions to ask) (3 to 5 minutes)

Have a conversation to ask and answer questions (6 minutes or so)

Write what they now know about their partner (2-3 minutes)

Invite participants to settle in again and listen to poem

Read poem two times: "To Look at Any Thing" by John Moffitt
After reading poem, have people sit in silence for a moment

Give instructions for drawing:

Each person will draw their partner according to specific guidelines — once their pen or pencil touches the paper, they may not look at their paper and they may not lift their pen or pencil from the paper until you say it's time to stop.

Pairs identify a person A and a person B [or whatever name you like]
Have people take a moment to look into their partner's eyes.

Lead the drawing and final reflections:

B draws A: (Pen on paper, close eyes and breathe, then draw for 60 seconds)
Give people a moment to share and react

A draws B: (Pen on paper, close eyes and breathe, then draw for 60 seconds)
Give people a moment to share and react

Ask now, what do you know? (5 min.)

Write about the entire experience: What new ways of seeing your partner and/or new understandings about him/her have arisen?

If time allows, write about what you learned about yourself. And what does this experience teach you about seeing? About where knowledge comes from? What lessons are there that you can apply elsewhere in your life?

Share (if time, with partner, and) in large group

To look at any thing,
If you would know that thing,
You must look at it long:
To look at this green and say,
'I have seen spring in these
Woods,' will not do—you must
Be the thing you see:
You must be the dark snakes of
Stems and ferny plumes of
leaves,
You must enter in
To the small silences between
the leaves,
You must take your time
And touch the very peace
They issue from.



—John Moffitt from the *Living Seed*

Additional Program Elements

The morning presentations make up the primary content of the Summer Session, and the afternoons and evenings offer opportunities to meet in small groups, attend instructional practice sessions, contemplative arts sessions, workshops and presentations of research. Additional 2012 Program elements included “Contemplative Communication,” with Dan Barbezat and Rhonda Magee; “Working with Mindfulness: Practices for Reducing Stress and Increasing Happiness” with Mirabai Bush; a “Multicultural Identities” workshop with Dan and Rhonda and those listed below.

School, clinics and monasteries: promises and perils of contemplative training

Willoughby Britton, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry and Human Behavior and Assistant Professor of Behavioral and Social Sciences at Brown University presented a version of her “Adverse Effects and Difficult Stages of the Contemplative Path” research to the Summer Session participants. Britton had recently presented the research as one of six recipients of the Varela Research Awards to His Holiness the Dalai Lama at the Mind and Life XXIV, *Latest Findings in Contemplative Neuroscience*, which took place at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, on April 24.

Her research is unusual because she focuses on the challenges of meditation rather than the benefits. It investigates difficult or challenging mind (and body) states that may result from intensive meditation practice. It includes interviews with more than 20 meditation teachers (Jack Kornfield, Shinzen Young, Joseph Goldstein, Adyashanti) and Buddhist scholars (Thupten Jinpa, John Dunne, Alan Wallace) as well as a number of experienced practitioners.

The research investigates:

- 1) the phenomenology of these experiences, including their duration, associated functional impairment and estimated prevalence
- 2) the wide range of interpretations from "Progress to Pathology" from well-known teachers and Buddhist scholars
- 3) "exacerbating factors" (practitioner characteristics, type of practice, available support) which may exacerbate expected (but perhaps difficult or challenging) meditation effects into the need for additional support measures

Participants took a keen interest in the presentation and engaged in penetrating discussion on the serious nature of meditation and the careful preparation required to be responsible to potential risks.

Poetry Reading with Marilyn Nelson

Marilyn Nelson, award-winning poet and Contemplative Practice Fellow Marilyn Nelson offered an evening of poetry to the Summer Session, reading from her collections *Fields of Praise*, and *Carver, a Life in Poems*, and delighting listeners with a reading of *Snook Alone*, a picture-book illustrated by Timothy Basil Ering.

Reflections, Responses & Evaluation

A new event evaluation process for 2012 using an online questionnaire vastly improved the response rate (from 10-20% in prior years to 90%) and provided important data from participants to help us understand our impacts and to refine our program offerings. There were significant changes to this year's session in terms of serving a larger number and more diverse participants. The wide-ranging, intelligent and heartfelt responses from participants are a valuable resource for planning next year.

