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**Reflections on a new course:  
*Effective and Sustainable Lawyering: The Meditative Perspective***

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The University of California Law School at Berkeley (Boalt Hall) is generally regarded as one of the top ten law schools in the country. I have been leading an informal meditation group at the law school for five years. We usually had between five and fifteen students attend each of our sessions. This year I approached the dean with a proposal that I offer a two credit seminar, and he readily agreed.

My next pleasant surprise was that 40 students signed up to take the course, a level of interest and enthusiasm that far exceeded my expectations. I had originally limited the class to 13 students, and the first 13 to sign up were admitted. I decided to expand the class size, choosing among the students on the waiting list largely on the basis of prior experience in the Boalt Meditation group. It was an interesting mix of students, some who were committed to exploring the inner life, a few with substantial meditation experience or other inner work; others were mainstream students who had never meditated before and whose career ambitions were quite conventional. Some were public interest law people while others had already accepted offers from large corporate law firms.

This was the first time that I had worked closely with Boalt students and the first time in many years that I had been in a law school classroom. I was impressed by the students. Obviously, they are smart in the way that the LSAT measures smart. But their good qualities went far beyond those limited skills. They were intellectually adventurous, emotionally mature, and committed to exploring meditation for their personal well-being and for their heightened effectiveness as lawyers. They wanted to use their legal education to build a more just world, including those who were not public interest law students in any obvious sense of the term. The spirit in the classroom was one of focused concentration, openness, mutual respect, and intense inquiry. Each class began with a period of Qi Gong practice, a form of moving meditation, followed by guided sitting meditation. Classroom discussions and exercises focused on important legal skills, such as deep listening, and on the relevance of the meditative perspective to the ethical, emotional and service dimensions of the lawyer's work.

The core assignment was to undertake a daily meditation practice and to keep a journal reflecting their meditation experience. They were invited to bring mindfulness—the moment-by-moment awareness cultivated by meditation—into

their life in the law school and into their other courses. They were given reading assignments each week, on meditation, and on the connections between meditation and law, including my book, *Making Waves and Riding the Currents: Activism and the Practice of Wisdom* and the seminal piece by Harris, Selbin and Lin in the *California Law Review*, about mindfulness practice integrated into community economic advocacy. The authors participated in a classroom session. I invited into one other session three colleagues who have integrated meditation practice into their work in law-- as lawyer, judge and professor. Students submitted summaries of their meditation journals 4 times during the course of the semester and two 2000-word papers. The written submissions were strikingly well-written, serious and insightful.

The level of enthusiasm and commitment remained high throughout the semester. I encouraged them to support each other, and established a buddy system which helped to sustain the effort and to build a strong sense of community. Three of the students attended a four-day meditation retreat for lawyers which I co-led at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in the middle of the semester.

I think that the first iteration of this course can be judged a success. Each of the students acquired a set of skills and practices that will serve them well in their law studies, their careers in law, and in their lives. Students who enrolled in the course to help them deal with the stress in their lives reported that they had found relief and also found much more—insights into themselves; into the paradoxes of legal practice, its challenges and opportunities; and skills that will help them to cope with the challenging times that lie ahead of them. Several students described the course as “transformative” and expressed the view that it should be offered to (or required for) all first year students.

The timing of the course proved to be felicitous. Because we have the first president to embody the qualities of mindfulness—equanimity, presence, clarity, a capacity to take forceful positions and to acknowledge his opponents without turning them into enemies. Without his example, we would have to talk more abstractly about what mindfulness might look like if one were to carry it into an active life. Second, during the course of the semester the world of law was shaken to its roots by the economic meltdown. Students in the seminar who had firm commitments from law firms suddenly and harshly were told not to report. Mindfulness practice helped them to put this setback into a larger perspective, and the sense of community that had formed within the group gave them significant support and broke through their sense of abandonment and isolation.

I am grateful for the experience of working with this exceptional group of students. I am interested in offering a course again next spring and to discussing with the Dean ways to strengthen the presence of mindfulness in the law school. Shortly before the end of the semester, Supreme Court Justice Stephen Breyer came to the law school to preside over the finals of the moot court competition. I was interested to hear that

Justice Breyer took time for meditation before taking the bench. I have meditated with him in his chambers, and I would have invited him to my class if it did not conflict with the moot court finals.