

Learning about obligation, compassion, and global justice:
the place of contemplative pedagogy

Caption: Contemplative techniques like meditation can help students to go beyond a merely cognitive understanding of their responsibilities as global citizens, and to find an authentic motivation to serve.

There are many reasons to internationalize the higher education curriculum: catering to more diverse instructor and student bodies or equipping students to flourish in an increasingly globalized world, for example. For many educators, though, a key reason for internationalization is ethical: it helps students to examine their implicit and explicit beliefs about whose wellbeing matters, and to develop a more globalized sense of responsibility and citizenship. Doing this pedagogical and curricular work, though, raises a set of questions about how those of us in the relatively privileged global north draw boundaries around our concern for others, what motivates our relative indifference to or dissociation from the suffering of distant strangers, and how these dynamics can be challenged and changed. In this chapter, I draw upon my experiences teaching a 300-level philosophy course on “Obligation, Compassion, and Global Justice”¹ to offer a rather unconventional answer to these questions. I suggest that while learning more about global inequalities, reflecting on moral principles, and getting a more vivid sense of the life experiences and perspectives of people in different parts of the world are important to a pedagogy of global citizenship, they are insufficient. A pedagogy of global citizenship also requires that students be supported in contemplative practice, bringing mindful attention to their own embodied experiences of dissociation from their own and others’ suffering.

I have taught Philosophy 368 at the University of Alberta in western Canada since 2006, to a class of 35-45 students, about half of them philosophy majors and half from other

¹ For the course syllabus see <http://www.arts.ualberta.ca/phil368/2007-368-Syllabus.pdf>

disciplines. The course is built around a cognitive and motivational puzzle relating to global citizenship and global justice. The puzzle begins with a few facts:

1. Large numbers of our fellow humans live in abject poverty (1.2 billion, by one recent estimate), go to bed hungry each night (an estimated 800 million people), and die daily from poverty related causes (perhaps 50,000 a day).
2. We could each prevent a portion of this suffering at minimal cost: the sachet of oral rehydration salts that could save a child from fatal diarrhea costs about fifty cents, and twenty cents buys a day's food rations distributed by the World Food Program in Sudan.
3. Almost all of us who work or study at universities in the global north spend a significant amount on luxuries we could easily forego.

Put these facts together, and a sobering set of choices and trade-offs becomes visible: in drinking lattes rather than regular coffees, for example, I am paying a premium over the course of a year that could instead be used to save many human lives. When I look this equation in the eye, I come to an inexorable conclusion: many aspects of my privilege come at an unconscionable cost, and ought to be given up for the immeasurably greater good that these resources could do for the world's neediest.²

But this brings us to the puzzle: like most students in my Canadian classrooms, recognizing this obligation changes almost nothing in how I actually live. I manage, like most privileged global citizens, to proceed relatively untroubled in a lifestyle that is unconscionable by my own standards. As decent people, we nonetheless find it hard to take strangers' welfare seriously in making choices, or indeed to even retain an awareness of others' suffering and our capacity to ameliorate it.

² There are a range of well-worn ripostes to this argument (e.g. saving children from starvation only leads to more suffering down the line); these ripostes are canvassed and rather effectively demolished in Pogge 2002 and Unger 1996.

As my own understanding of the dynamics of dissociation from others' suffering developed, the course took on a quite unconventional shape. Before getting to this, I'd like to step back and sketch the terrain of approaches to teaching global citizenship, at least from the standpoint of English-speaking political theory.

Pedagogies of global citizenship

Only in the last twenty years have mainstream political philosophers in the English-speaking world begun systematically to question the assumption that justice applies only within bounded political communities. Whereas prior to the late 1980s political theorists did not typically even notice that their conceptions of justice screeched to a halt at national borders, debates in political theory now take it as given that many of our deepest challenges of justice (and indeed survival) traverse national boundaries, in a context of profound global interdependence.

Many political theorists now aim to persuade their readers of an individual and collective obligation, on the part of people in the global north, to redress gross inequalities of resources and power with the global south. And at an implicit or explicit level, this has these theorists grappling with how to motivate people to recognize and challenge their own privilege, and their own disconnection from the suffering and the fate of those beyond their nation's borders. I see two dominant approaches to motivating change among the privileged.

i) Pedagogies of reason

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the shape of the western philosophical tradition, the dominant way that English-speaking philosophers have tried to convince their readers to attend to the plight of the world's least well off is through rational argumentation.

Peter Singer's (1997) influential argument—which I adopted to set up the puzzle above—provides a clear example of this resort to rational persuasion as a route to changing self-perceptions, understandings of obligation, and ultimately behavior on the part of the privileged. Singer's argument is premised on the view that morality requires impartial

fairness between people, and that from an impartial standpoint the gross disparities in wealth and life prospects across the globe are morally indefensible. He suggests that almost all of us are impartialist in our deepest moral convictions, but that we self-servingly ignore the entailments of this for our everyday behavior, treating the satisfaction of our most casual desires as more important than meeting the crucial needs of strangers. The role of the philosopher is to point out this sharp contradiction between our moral convictions and our behavior, so that we can see our own hypocrisy and hopefully be moved to reduce the conflict.

And yet as I have observed in my own life and my own classrooms, being rationally persuaded of a moral obligation is rarely effective in motivating change. Nor does the resilience of our privileged modes of behavior seem adequately explained by hypocrisy or weakness of the will, concepts that describe the dictates of morality being outweighed by our non-moral or immoral preferences, goals, or desires. Rather, the ‘knowing’ that we achieve through exposure to rational arguments about obligation seems disconnected from the complexity even of our moral being, and is eroded or displaced not by desire or by conscious, countervailing goals, but by complicated dynamics of dissociation and motivation.

ii) Pedagogies of sentiment

A number of prominent philosophers now argue that acting ethically toward others is less a matter of applying abstract moral principles than of learning about the particularities of others’ lives, and so developing empathy and compassion for them.

Richard Rorty (1993), for example, suggests that the main obstacle to our offering help to distant strangers is that they don’t seem like part of a valued ‘we’. This isn’t remedied, though, through abstract, principled argumentation; rather, it’s through vehicles like literature that our sense of the boundaries of our moral communities can shift. We hear sad, sentimental stories about others’ suffering, and suddenly see that they are mothers like us, or get their hearts broken like us, or love soccer like us. And out of these particular realizations comes a sense of connection and commitment that can change our behavior.

Martha Nussbaum (1996a, 1996b) offers a different kind of therapy of sentiment: she suggests that when we learn about the particularity of others' lives, we are able to see that they share a variety of distinctively human capacities with us, and so deserve our regard. This is not merely an abstract realization but a cultivation of both reason and passion that expands our circle of concern. And so she describes a cosmopolitan education, one that involves learning how distant communities and cultures live, and increases our sense of appreciation for otherness, and our commitment to global citizenship.

Pedagogies of sentiment seem to offer a more promising diagnosis of our dissociation from the suffering of distant strangers than do pedagogies of reason, for they offer a more complex picture of the learner. But pedagogies of sentiment do not quite account for the cognitive and motivational puzzle that I laid out earlier: internationalizing the classroom, and giving students plenty of particularistic information about other countries and groups, does not in fact seem to displace habits of privilege, nor does it seriously diminish dissociation from others' suffering.

I would suggest that our dissociation from others' suffering is persistent because it is powerfully motivated—not by self-interest, as pedagogies of reason might suggest, but by inchoate fear. This, at least, is what I discover when I attend closely to my own experience, say when a charity infomercial appears on my TV with the image of a starving child: a wave of sensation and emotion rushes through me, a hint of my visceral belief that if I let this suffering in (not to mention the countless reiterations of this suffering in further starving children), it will destroy me. And another discovery when I attend closely to my own experience: that this recoiling from others' suffering has a counterpart in my relationship to my own suffering. Here too, I withdraw and dissociate from emotional intensity, out of a visceral conviction that I cannot stand to experience it unmediated. And one further discovery: that a tremendous number of my habits, including habits of consumption, serve to soothe and deaden the anxiety that arises from a fear of directly experiencing suffering—others' and my own.

My point is not that this story of my own dissociation from suffering and habits of privilege is precisely mirrored in your experience or that of my students. Rather, the point

is that this ‘deeper’ story of my motivations and resistances, of my embodied and emotional experiences, is so much at odds with the narrative I would standardly offer of my life, my moral and philosophical commitments, and the kind of person I am. I suggest, in other words, that just as we spend much of our privileged lives disconnected from the suffering of strangers, so we spend them caught up in narratives and self-descriptions that do a poor job of capturing the reality of our embodied experience. This is the most profound element of our alienation: alienation from our internal realities. And this is not an alienation that gets corrected by rational reflection or by a rich sense of the particulars of others’ lives.

This alienation gets corrected, I want to suggest, by the ability to observe our own present-moment experience with a certain degree of compassionate detachment. This compassionate self-observation of our own bodily sensations and emotional patterns requires an ability to let the usual storylines go, in order to begin to notice what’s going on in us right now. And this sort of rigorous yet kind self-observation gets learned through ongoing practice, through a form of inquiry seldom used in the contemporary western academy: contemplation.

Contemplative pedagogy

Both pedagogies of reason and pedagogies of sentiment tend to remain within a paradigm of education and scholarship as *third-person knowing*. Our subject matter—principles of moral obligation, facts about global interdependence, narratives about the lives of others, facts about the psychology of dissociation and bystanding—lies outside of us, and we use careful analysis and critical reflection to reach understanding, and to orient our actions in the world.

But the puzzle with which Philosophy 368 begins is that of the entrenchment of habits of privilege. Neither more information nor more careful rational reflection is able to shift our deep patterns of thought, affect, or experience. We may feel empathy for others’ suffering, or connection to distant others, as we learn more about them; but these changes tend to remain superficial and evanescent so long as we neglect a first-person realization

of the powerful motivations and drives that underlie our persistent tendency to dissociate. This, at least, is the analysis that led me to complement third-person approaches in Philosophy 368 with the first-person inquiry of contemplative pedagogy.

Contemplative pedagogy is getting increasing attention in North American higher education: a yearly week-long workshop began at Smith College in 2005, attracting about 40 educators to each summer session,³ and Naropa University initiated its own international summer session on contemplative pedagogy in 2007⁴; a major international conference was held on the subject at Columbia University Teachers College in 2005⁵ and another in San Francisco in 2007⁶; and even the staid *Chronicle of Higher Education* has reported positively on the movement (Gravois 2005). Contemplative pedagogies include a wide range of practices, but the orienting practice and experience is that of meditation. As Arthur Ledoux (1998) writes,

By meditation I mean the practice of mindfulness, training the mind to focus in a steady and non-judging way on the different phases of human experience. Mindfulness is an ancient practice cultivated strongly in Buddhist traditions but which overlaps contemplative practices in many other traditions. Mindfulness practice typically begins by paying clear, steady, non-reactive attention to the sensations of ones own breathing and then extending this wise and compassionate attention to embrace all bodily sensations and then feelings, moods, thoughts, and intentions. One way to describe the goal of mindfulness is the cultivation of bare attention: the ability to focus on any aspect of life whatsoever with this calm concentration.

³ This summer session is convened by the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society, and funded by the Fetzer Foundation. See <http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/>

⁴ See <http://www.naropa.edu/cace/seminar.cfm>

⁵ See <http://www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic/05conference.html>

⁶ See <http://www.heartofeducation.org/>

The goal of the contemplative pedagogies that I introduced in Philosophy 368 was to cultivate this kind of mindfulness.

Contemplative techniques in Philosophy 368

Implementing contemplative pedagogies in my course on global justice felt like a dangerous leap: I had been developing my own meditation practice for only a couple of years and though I saw important implications for studying and teaching about compassion and obligation toward the global poor, I was uncertain about how to realize these. How, for example, should I present the relationship between contemplative pedagogies and the conventional forms of inquiry associated with the discipline of philosophy? I eventually realized that I did not have to resolve these tough pedagogical questions prior to the course; rather, the course could itself constitute a collective inquiry into the significance of contemplation to the issues we were studying. In this and many other respects, bringing contemplation into my pedagogies marked a seismic shift in my teaching practice: it led me to give up a great deal of control and authority in my classroom, and to invite students to be a conscious participants in pedagogical reflection. Let me outline three major contemplative elements of the course.

Meditation

In every meeting of the class, we did about seven minutes of mindfulness meditation, calmly focusing our attention on the movement of our breath (noticing the sensation of the breath, counting breaths), and returning to our breath each time we noticed ourselves getting caught up in thoughts. I was careful in explaining the rationale for meditation practice as part of the course, but offered quite spare instructions for the practice itself. I would remind students to sit up straight in their seats, feet flat on the floor, arms comfortable on their laps or tables. I would remind them that the goal wasn't to stop themselves from thinking but rather to notice when they got lost in thoughts: the core of the practice was then to let thoughts go and return to the breath, over and over. And I would remind them of the importance of kindness toward themselves when they noticed they were thinking: this was not a contest, but a rigorously gentle exploration of our own

experience. After some feedback and experimentation, we decided that this period of meditation worked best if placed right at the start of class; students were good at arriving on time and if they did not, they would wait outside for the bell that signaled the end of meditation.

I had anticipated student resistance to meditating in class, imagining that some students would judge it a waste of time, or irrelevant to the course's subject matter, or unphilosophical. Instead, students were almost uniformly enthusiastic about it. Based on formative and summative feedback from students, at least four things happened. First, most students deeply appreciated the chance to simply slow down. They spent their days rushing from class to class, juggling intense demands associated with school and jobs, bombarded with images and sounds; and they cherished the opportunity simply to do nothing for seven minutes. Second, many appreciated not only the break but the practice of meditation: they were curious about their internal lives, and interested in training themselves to notice their in-the-moment experience in new ways. Third, they were able to see connections between meditation and the course material, and interested in meditatively exploring their relationship to suffering and moral responsibility. This was helped along by the use of a text, read across the term and alongside more philosophical articles, that discussed themes of contemplation and our relationship to our own and others' suffering (Dass and Gorman 1988). In general, the 1st person elements of the course invited students to bring the sometimes arcane arguments of philosophers into dialogue with their own experience, and offered them a rigorous set of techniques that supported this. And fourth, meditating together at the beginning of each class brought us into the room together, and allowed a calmer and more careful engagement with one another; this laid the ground for better work in groups than students were used to experiencing, or than I had experienced in other classrooms.

Free-writing

It was at the 2005 Summer Session on Contemplative Curriculum Design that I came to recognize, through a presentation by Mary Rose O'Reilley, that free writing could be understood as a contemplative practice (see O'Reilley 1993). Free-writing, popularized

by Peter Elbow (1973), means writing non-stop for a fixed period of time—the only rule is that the pen keep moving. Because writing in this way short-circuits the impulse to edit, it allows writing without so much scripting and conscious control; one gets into the flow of an idea or impulse, and writes things that one didn't know one had to say.

I offered a prompt or question for each free-write. Several times during the term, free-writes followed meditation, allowing students to process that experience. Other times, free-writes invited reflection on a particular text, or a question that we'd been struggling with in discussion up to that moment.

Sometimes, when the topic of a free-write was very raw, I would let students know in advance that they would not be asked to share the writing or to include it in their portfolio. The default, though, was for the free-write to be submitted, returned by me with only a 'thank you' as comment or evaluation, and then included in a portfolio that was evaluated holistically at the end of the term. Sometimes students would be asked to read their free-writes to one another in small groups, and here we followed a protocol that I learned from O'Reilly. Writers would be given a couple of minutes to decide if there were elements of their writing that they wished to leave out when they read. Then each student would read their work to their peers, who would listen as mindfully as they could, simply say 'thank you' at the end, then move on to the next reading without further discussion.

Free-writing not only offered a mode of contemplative inquiry but also helped to alleviate some of the anxiety and intimidation that students experience around writing. I was astounded again and again by the wisdom and authenticity of voice that I encountered in most free-writes—a much rarer phenomenon when I read students' analytical essays. I also believe that free-writing, together with other low-stakes writing exercises used in the course, helped students to grasp that writing is a way of generating thoughts, and not only of representing thoughts that have already been finely honed.

Lectio Divina

Another technique that I took from O'Reilly was *lectio divina* or sacred reading, which has its origins in the Catholic monastic tradition. For a fixed period of time—perhaps five minutes—students would focus on an assigned paragraph of text and would try to bring the mind of meditation to their reading. Rather than following thoughts about the text, they would try to simply dwell on it, reading again and again whatever aspects caught their eye and seeing what meanings emerged. Underlining was permitted, but not note taking. We also applied this technique to photographs—in the very first class of term, for example, students moved from meditation to four minutes of contemplation of a photograph of a man cradling a starving child.

Following this contemplative reading or seeing, students might be asked to free-write to capture what had come to them, or simply to talk in groups about the experience. Students frequently expressed surprise at the meanings that they stumbled across in this way, and the connections they were able to make. Like free-writing, *lectio divina* suspended some of students' intimidation and self-monitoring, and allowed them to tap into new levels of meaning, experience, and insight. Some students also expressed appreciation for the atmosphere of awe, or at least care, that contemplative reading brought to the written word: it cultivated an ethos of intellectual engagement that can be lost in the speed and instrumentality of much university reading.

Outcomes

I taught this contemplative version of Philosophy 368 in 2006 and 2007, and will teach it again in 2008. Student responses have been enthusiastic, as conveyed through anonymous formative evaluations conducted several times each term, and through narrative comments and numerical results on formal summative evaluations.⁷ Stepping back from details, I would observe four things about outcomes.

⁷ In 2006, median ratings on a five-point scale included: "In-class time was used effectively" = 4.5; "I am motivated to learn more about these subject areas" = 4.8; "I

First, student reactions made clear to me their thirst for courses that allow them to engage with their own experiences in rigorous and reflective ways, and to think carefully about questions of meaning, morality, and spirituality in their lives.⁸ There is a useful distinction to be made, though, between contemplative pedagogies (which train students in particular approaches to self-observation) and holistic education (which can more easily invite students to tell their habitual stories about themselves, rather than directing mindful attention to what is beneath these stories). I find echoes of this distinction in students' comments on the course, where a number of them note a difference between the kind of personal perspective they were encouraged to develop in this course, and invitations in other courses to 'share their feelings' or 'speak from their perspective' (which some of them described as irrelevant and/or infantilizing).

Second, student feedback indicated a deepened interest in issues of global justice, and in their own implication in global injustice. Many students indicated that they remained puzzled about their ethical responsibilities, and about the dynamics of dissociation and compassion that the course had taken up; but to me this uncertainty is a fruitful one, and often was held by students with real curiosity, as well as gentleness toward themselves. Students tended to move away from harsh judgments of themselves and others for implication in global injustice—away from a discourse of obligation and guilt that I believe distracts from our tendency or even ability to connect compassionately with those in need. They tended to move toward a willingness to experiment with their own tolerance for letting in others' suffering, and with what this might feel like in action. And

increased my knowledge of the subject areas in this course" = 4.8; "Overall, the quality of the course content was excellent" = 4.7; "The instructor provided constructive feedback throughout the course" = 4.9; and "Overall, this instructor was excellent" = 4.9. All of these results are above the 75th percentile, and many of them are above the 90th percentile.

⁸ This impression is supported by research results from the Spirituality in Higher Education project, led by Alexander and Helen Astin at UCLA. The extensive, US-based survey found, for example, that 76% of college students say they are "searching for meaning and purpose in life," while more than half say that their processors never provide opportunities to discuss the meaning and purpose of life. See <http://www.spirituality.ucla.edu>

they tended to be increasingly open to the possibility that their service to those who suffered, whether by giving up luxuries for others, or volunteering, or reorienting career and life plans, might not be a sacrifice (as Peter Singer suggests), but rather a movement toward greater meaning and fulfillment in their lives.

Third, the overtly experimental quality of the course, and the amount of uncertainty we entertained together about both method and content, seemed to cultivate a less anxious, more curious, even delighted stance toward learning. Narrative evaluation comments repeatedly said that for a course about such depressing subject matter, it really was engaging and fun. My analysis here is that in much of their educational experience, students are reminded again and again of what they lack, and come to treat education as a struggle to elicit praise and avoid humiliation. A range of aspects of this course, from the emphasis on compassion toward self that is part of meditation, to the cultivation of trust among students in the classroom, to the pervasive spirit of inquiry in the course, opened up for students a sense that they might in fact learn from a place of plenty, where they have genuine knowledge to offer one another, and where there's collective pleasure in exploring tough questions.

Fourth, the sense of operating from a place of plenty rather than lack, and so experiencing genuine curiosity and joy in learning, characterized my own experience of the course. Because I made the tentativeness and experimental quality of the course methods explicit to students and invited them to be agents in this inquiry, I was freed to be uncertain, and so to be a learner in my own classroom. And because I would do classroom exercises alongside my students, I got to explore my own present-moment experience of teaching (and of inquiring into the issues of the course) through meditation and free-writing, in ways that changed my sense of my experience and possibilities as a teacher. The community, the curiosity, and the mutual support that we built in the classroom, in part thanks to contemplative methods, included me as well: I ended up experiencing and so modeling the freedom in learning that I sought for my students, and that I now realize I was yearning for in my own experience of the classroom.

Issues and future directions

The contemplative principles and practices described in this article are being used across disciplines and institutions, from poetry courses at West Point to physics courses at Amherst College. But there are distinctive issues that arise with contemplative pedagogies, some of which continue to confront me.

First an issue that I haven't faced at all but that I gather looms over the use of contemplative pedagogies in US contexts: the question of the legitimacy or even permissibility of bringing spiritual practices into the classroom, especially in public colleges and universities. There is a ready answer to this question, in that meditation is increasingly accepted as a thoroughly secular practice—taught, for example, in medical contexts to reduce stress and mitigate pain. But in the contemplative pedagogy community there is another side to this coin of secularization: meditation techniques have their roots in rich Buddhist and Muslim and Jewish and Christian traditions, and there might be a loss in stripping away these spiritual contexts in order to popularize contemplation, including as a pedagogy.

Second, I face questions of the experience and adeptness I should have with a contemplative practices before I introduce them in the classroom. I struggled with this in introducing simple mindfulness meditation, and struggle with it again as I look ahead to the next iteration of the course where I plan to experiment with *metta* or lovingkindness meditation. My response to this uncertainty has been to go ahead—to embrace the shakiness I may feel in this aspect of my teaching (as in many others), and to let students be participants in assessing what works. What seems crucial is that I myself be practicing mindfulness and presence as best I can while teaching contemplative techniques (rather than having my attention elsewhere, or being caught up in fantasies or stories about what's going on). There also is a crucial distinction between employing contemplative pedagogies and seeking to be a spiritual teacher; in the context of the academy, the former must not be allowed to slide into the latter.

A colleague recently shared a gem of advice about teaching meditation that comes from Chogyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, and that provides a provocative

baseline for contemplative pedagogies: the requirement is that while you are actually teaching meditation, you remain sane. This turns out to be a deeply challenging prescription.

A third issue that I continue to struggle with is around contemplative and analytical modes of writing. I noted above the liveliness of spontaneous student writing, and the labored and intimidated quality of much analytical writing. I want to understand more about how I can support my students in writing analytically from a place of plenty rather than lack, and so in finding a more authentic voice as philosophical writers.

And a final issue has become more and more vivid to me as I have ventured into fresh territory in my teaching: how much the success of different pedagogies indexes to my ability to be present and grounded in offering them. This does not mean certainty that they will work; indeed, presence and groundedness often feels inquisitive, and even quiveringly uncertain. But as I learn to bring contemplation more fully into my own life, and my own teaching, I gain a sense of what it means to be authentic in my role as teacher, and to hold this seat with the authority of someone who is not hiding from himself.

Contemplative pedagogies, I have suggested, can help students to understand the habits of thought, judgment, and reaction that keep them trapped in the cocoon of their own privilege, which is also to say their own suffering. As such, these pedagogies have a pivotal role to play in internationalizing higher education, insofar as one goal of internationalization is to cultivate a meaningful and motivating sense of global citizenship. I hope I have also made clear, though, that contemplative pedagogies deepen the process of teaching and learning much more pervasively than this: they bring our bare humanity into the classroom in ways that allow education to be more holistic, more fulfilling, and more real for both professors and students.⁹

⁹ My thanks to the Center for the Contemplative Mind in Society and to Naropa University for their respective seminars in contemplative pedagogy; to the Fetzer Foundation and the Frederick P. Lenz Foundation for funding these seminars; to the University of Alberta for supporting and recognizing my experiments in contemplative

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