

Compassion Practices in Higher Education

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“The concern is to join and integrate the search for power and material progress on the one hand with the quest for wisdom and well-being on the other. The general objective is a way of being that will enable people to humanize technology, realize the full promise of democracy, heal the Earth, and celebrate life.”

*- Steven Rockefeller, Academic Committee member,
The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society*

In classrooms from Princeton to West Point and University of Michigan to Naropa, students are beginning classes in silence, “listening to” texts as only monks once did, developing mindful approaches to dispute resolution, and designing meditative cabins and sitting halls with cutting edge architectural design principles. They are all enrolled in courses taught by Contemplative Practice Fellows, a collaboration of the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society, the American Council of Learned Societies, and the Fetzer Institute. Since 1997, the program has awarded 100 fellowships to faculty in 79 colleges and universities across the United States to encourage the study of contemplative practices from a variety of disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives. The program supports the study of contemplation as a historical phenomenon and as a method to develop concentration, deepen understanding, and foster an interest in and understanding of the nature of mind and consciousness.

Contemplative practices are a vital part of all major religious and spiritual traditions and have long had a place in intellectual inquiry as well. The predecessors of our colleges and universities in the West, of course, were established as *alternatives* to monastic schools, where contemplative practices were central to learning. These new institutions were committed to the pursuit of rational knowledge and later to the scientific method. But, as Brian Stock (Professor, Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto) explained in an address to the Symposium on Contemplative Education at Amherst College in 2003, there are important examples in Western intellectual history of the use of contemplative practices, which he defines as based on “a spirituality that does not depend for its validity on pre-existing metaphysical assumptions or associations, that is, a secular spirituality.” He names Montaigne, whose writing practice was a form of contemplative reflection, and whose interest in the nature of attention and the nature of the self is shared by contemporary contemplatives. Seneca gave such Zen-sounding advice as “To be everywhere is to be nowhere.” Augustine and Seneca both used a literary device, the soliloquy, as a form of self-inquiry through oral dialog. And Augustine was the first to use autobiography as contemplative practice; the *Confessions* is an inquiry into his life and the nature of all life.

Robert Wuthnow, in *After Heaven: Spirituality in America Since the 1950's*, suggests that contemplative

practices are innately American. Practice, he says, invokes the tradition of hard work, individual initiative, and responsible civic participation, values widely shared by Americans. Interestingly, the contemplative practices that are now being taught and learned by Americans, in these classrooms as well as in the culture at large, are most often either traditional or adapted forms from Eastern contemplative traditions, including Buddhism, Hinduism, and Taoism. These practices include yoga, meditation, qi gong, tai chi, and mantra (the repetition of a word or phrase). Even the Christian and Jewish contemplative practices that are reaching many people of faith are frequently influenced by Eastern traditions: Centering Prayer, taught by Father Thomas Keating and Father Basil Pennington (who, like Thomas Merton, learned Buddhist meditation practices) and the Contemplative Outreach network, is a Christian form closely related to mantra meditation; many Jewish meditations include Buddhist mindfulness elements, etc. One form—*lectio divina*, or sacred reading—seems to be uniquely Western (Christian) and has been adapted for the classroom by many of the Fellows.

The courses have been introduced at an interesting time in academic history. They both complement and challenge the postmodern campus culture. Contemplative practice focuses on moment-to-moment nonjudgmental awareness, the rising and passing away of momentary phenomena, which in some way confirms the idea of the fragmentary nature of reality that postmodernists posit when they claim that there is no metanarrative, no unifying story. No defining story, true contemplatives would agree, but unified nevertheless, in that all phenomena are interconnected, share an “interbeing,” are part of a, some would say, divine wholeness. The question of contemplative epistemology is only beginning to be explored, but the contemplative approach is one of inquiry into the nature of things, a scientific suspension of disbelief (and belief) in an attempt to “know” reality through direct observation by being fully present in the moment. Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche, a Tibetan educated in both Lhasa and at Oxford, founded Naropa University on contemplative principles. Wisdom, he says, is “immediate and nonconceptual insight which provides the basic inspiration for intellectual study.” Having seen clearly one’s own mind, one has a natural desire to see how others experience reality.

The challenge to the other great foundation of all contemporary institutions, modernity (from the Enlightenment onward), is probably greater. Buddhist contemplatives would say there is no stable self, certainly not one that is dependent on thinking (as in Descartes), and no contemplative from any tradition would agree that it is reason alone that leads to ultimate truth. Although the contemplative investigation is in some sense scientific, and although some scientists (see the work of Amherst physicist Arthur Zajonc) say that a nonrational leap happens in the moment of scientific insight, contemplatives look to an intuitive, nonconceptual, direct, experiential “knowing” as the path to wisdom. The practical legacy of the modernist tradition has also been a compartmentalized, fragmented way of learning and teaching, dualistic alienation of body from mind, emotion from intellect, humans from nature, and art from science, whereas the basis of contemplative understanding is wholeness, unity, integration.

So what has been happening in these classes? What are the fellows reporting? Is there a role for productive silence in the classroom? Just as introducing computers into students’ lives didn’t just affect the amount of research they could do or the length of their papers but also the way that they think (PowerPoint!), the

way they relate to other students and their teachers, their health, and so on, contemplative practices have had an extraordinary range of effects on the teachers, the students, the classroom, and on learning, teaching, research, and personal relationships. They include increased concentration, greater capacity for synthetic thinking, conceptual flexibility, and an appreciation for a different type of intellectual process, distinct from the linear, analytical and product oriented processes so often valued in contemporary education. (See Deborah Klimburg-Salter, “The Contemplative Scholar” on www.contemplativemind.org/programs/academic.) For example, Fellow Robin Hunt at the University of Washington worked with contemplative practice to develop balance in a theatre piece: “I conceived of a play in which actors have to deal with all the literal meanings of balance while playing scenes dealing with the figurative meanings of the word.... Using the practice of *slow tempo*, the physical requirements of balancing demand that one find a calm and clear mental state in the moment.”

In the following few pages, I will focus primarily on the potential for the cultivation of compassion and empathy through contemplative practice in the classroom. Although empathy is the capacity to feel another’s emotional state (joy as well as suffering), and compassion is the experience of feeling another’s pain or suffering, for the purposes of this discussion, I use the terms compassion and empathy interchangeably.

It is a contemplative premise that compassion and knowledge complement each other: “knowledge without compassion is inhuman; compassion without knowledge is ineffective” (Physicist Victor Weisskopf, MIT). Compassion is the response of the heart to another’s (or one’s own) suffering. Contemplatives have sought to reduce this suffering through inner transformation (which can then lead to lovingkindness and compassionate action): “Although attempting to bring about world peace through the internal transformation of individuals is difficult, it is the only way”—Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh (*Peace is Every Step*). Science has sought solutions through the manipulation of the physical world, but not acknowledged the need for a systematic investigation of personal motives, attachments, and capacity for instinctive loving care. Contemplative practices bring this tension into the light of the classroom for exploration by awakening the experience of compassion itself.

Compassion exists in relationship. It can be the relationship with oneself, but in the classroom fellows most often report the changes in relationships of students with others. The majority of fellows reported that “incorporating contemplative practice into their courses changed the nature of their relationship with their students in a positive way. The process and intention of creating a space of openness and trust often led to a deepening of the relationships between the students and between the students and teachers. Even professors who usually had good relationships with their students noted that these relationships tended to go deeper and developed much earlier in the course” (Megien Scribner, *Fellows Survey*, 2000).

We are hearing that the students are learning not only from the text and the information but are awakened to learning more from the professor himself or herself, that is, from who the professor is as well as the information in her lecture. We have not done formal research with students, but in anecdotal reports many students talk about these classes as a refreshing experience, with a new appreciation of their teachers, which for some teachers creates an opportunity in the classroom to take risks and explore in more experimental

ways, and to connect what they are teaching to other aspects of life.

Clifford Hill, a Fellow at Columbia Teachers' College, created a web site of practices and images from diverse contemplative traditions and introduced meditation in the classroom. He found that the practice of exploring the mind and inner life encouraged his students to use e-mail in a new way with him and each other. That communication was written more often in simple, direct language, describing exactly what was happening. There was a kind of intimacy that email makes possible but often lacks.

By introducing contemplative practice, the teacher sets an intention that learning will happen in the spirit of investigation and discovery. This intention may be common to all pedagogical methods, but it seems particularly true in these classes, where, for example, the practice is silence at the beginning of class and maybe some Tai Chi movements between parts of the class. The meditation calms and quiets the mind and allows the students to let go of other things they have been thinking about, worrying about, and bringing into class, so they are more likely to begin with fresh minds. Fellow Robyn Hunt at the University of Washington described the practice she used as "a steadfast awareness of all that transpires without focusing on, and so being distracted by, any one phenomenon." The practice of paying attention and seeing simply what is there with no preconception during the meditation, transfers then to the subject of the class. At the same time, by noticing everything that is arising, the practice helps the student integrate the varied aspects of their lives. Some teachers talked about the effect of the practices on students who have experiences in their lives that adversely affect their ability to learn. Students feel that these experiences, from difficult family lives to eating disorders or financial troubles, are wholly separate from life in the classroom. In contemplative practice, the student directly experiences the way in which body, mind, and spirit are connected and can open to the subject matter as relevant to one's personal life. As that understanding of interconnection grows, the world, including the classroom, begins to make deep sense. Stress is reduced both by the calming effect of slow breathing on the body and by the intellectual understanding of the natural integration of life.

In classes where students and teachers actually do contemplative practice together the effect can be profound; it makes the statement that the professor and the students are learning together. They are together opening their minds to what is going to be discovered in this room at this time. During off-site meditation retreats for students at Yale Law School sponsored by the Center, a number of professors learned the practice along with the students. It was a significant departure from the usual hierarchical relationship, even at Yale where many of the professors play strong mentoring roles and have close relationships with their students. They were all learning at the same time, at the same level, because meditation students are instructed to bring "beginner's mind" to the situation: "each moment, new moment." The conversations that followed between the students and professors arose from the understanding by students that "you are the professor, and you know much more about the profession than I do, but we are also two human beings exploring the nature of law, jurisprudence, justice, and the truth together. And that changes things radically."

Many professors say that they are renewed in their excitement about teaching from being able to teach in that spirit. Fellow Steven Nuss, teaching a course on Contemplating Music through Contemplative Practice at Colby College, wrote in his course description for students: "This is not a class in which I already have the

answers and I expect you to learn what I know and then do a test. I don't have the answers; that's why we are doing this class." For the students it relaxes the oppression that some students feel in a hierarchical situation. It may seem like a risk to the professor, but, when attempted, it has more often authenticated than undermined authority.

At the University of Wisconsin, Richard Davidson has used brain imaging to show that meditation shifts activity in the prefrontal cortex from right to left hemisphere, reorienting the brain from a stressful fight or flight mode to one of acceptance, which is at the heart of compassion. Even so, twenty minutes of silence in a history class will not necessarily awaken compassion or compassionate action in all students, although intensive meditation practice has that potential. But many professors reported that compassion was awakened in students in relation to the subject being discussed. One teacher wrote, "It seemed that a circle of longing hearts immediately found its center."

Whether it was in a class using meditation to examine "the great suffering of the 20th Century" (the Holocaust, slavery, and apartheid) at Bryn Mawr or a class on environment and contemplative practice at Swarthmore, students reported that they experienced an empathetic and compassionate response of the heart to the suffering of others. In an anthropology class at University of California at Davis on Meditation and Media Violence, Fellow Alan Klima wrote, "While there are persuasive and important arguments about how mass media technology conspires to eliminate perception of real pain and suffering through "compassion fatigue" and other processes, by returning to Buddhist meditation, the course was able to open up to a wider field of discussion on this matter." He added that the combination of meditation and the class materials was able to "render the familiar unfamiliar, and the unfamiliar strangely relevant to the familiar" and that "many students began to articulate their own ethical practice of viewing violence...."

There was also an increase in compassion in the way students related to each other. One law student wrote after he got back to Yale Law School: "After we got back, I was writing a brief for a class. There was lots of research to be done, and I felt a bit behind. I was worried about it. I pulled an all-nighter and got all this research done. One of my friends asked me the next day, 'How is your research going?' I had actually found a lot of cases. Before, I would have been very contractual and thought, 'I don't want to give him all my cases. I would have said, 'Well, if you show me some off your cases, I'll show you some of mine.' But then I stepped back and thought, 'Well, you know really, what does it matter? Give him the stuff and maybe it will make his brief better than yours, but it's not that big a deal and you probably ultimately will build a better friendship of this, which is what it is really about'" (see reports on www.contemplativemind.org/programs/law/). In a class on contemplation and environmental writing at the University of St. Thomas, a student in the class committed suicide during the semester, and the others needed to grieve. The professor, Fellow Mary Rose O'Reilly, was grateful that it had happened in her contemplative class, which created space for what was needed. "As I write this, tears again. We cried all the time in class, made a rule, *Cry and keep talking. Cry and keep writing.* We called it *crying practice*. And I learned that the single most important thing a contemplatively centered classroom teaches the teacher is not a pedagogical recipe but *pedagogical flexibility*."

Compassion, as in the law student's story, also brings up the issue of competition. Obviously competi-

tion is a motivator and has often been used well in this culture, and there will probably always be times when teachers use competition to excite students, as sports, games, and debating do. But there are many situations in which collaboration can produce a better, richer, more multidimensional result than competition. The model now in business and all learning organizations is that information is so complex and the response to global issues is so challenging that they often require more than a single mind, that a group thinking and working together is more likely to find a creative response. Training in compassion and empathy, contemplative practices in open listening and inquiry, prepare students for these demands. Further, compassion and empathy developed in this way is increasing interest in ethics, and the loss of ethical systems is often lamented in the modern academic community.

An example of increased awareness of the needs and rights of others came from a course on Contemplative Practice, Health Promotion, and Disability on Campus, taught by Fellow Daniel Holland at the University of Arkansas. Students with disabilities, who are at particularly high risk for chronic stress, loneliness, and attrition, and who encounter more obstacles gaining peer support and group membership than non-disabled peers, reported significant improvement in their ability to cope with daily stressors. But perhaps of even more interest, a large number of students who did not identify themselves as having a disability or chronic illness indicated that they had gained a new, more positive perspective regarding those who do.

Our youth are entering the professions and the work force without a capacity to lead an integrated life in a democratic civil society where they can make intelligent and compassionate contributions. At the rational level, there is so much more to know than there ever was. On the other hand, computers are holding and processing much of that information for us as extensions of our consciousness, and that will only increase. We are faced with the question, What does it mean to be human? What is the unique and appropriate role on this planet for us and the seven generations that follow? Contemplative awakening through practice in academic settings is helping us ask that question in a way that could lead us to the essence of what it is to be human. And compassion is part of that discovery.