

# Meeting on Contemplative Pedagogy in the Disciplines: Philosophy, Religious Studies, Psychology

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society  
Amherst College, March 28-30, 2008

By Piper Murray

On March 28-30, 2008, the Center for Contemplative Mind in Society convened a special meeting of academics in Philosophy, Religious Studies, and Psychology who are incorporating contemplative pedagogy into their courses. Held at Amherst College, the meeting presented participants an opportunity to share their work in progress and discuss some of the critical questions that work poses.

How do we assess the ways our students are affected by a particular contemplative practice? How do we experience ourselves as both professors and practitioners of the contemplative? What are the ranges of techniques available, and how do we learn about them as faculty? What are the ethics of contemplative education? What are the consequences of opening students up, and what kind of follow-up do we offer them after the semester ends? Through presentations, contemplative practice, and discussion, meeting participants spoke to how they are negotiating these and other issues in the context of their own classrooms, disciplines, and institutions, as well as in their own lives as practitioners and professors.



## Philosophy

Mitchell Green, Professor of Philosophy,  
University of Virginia

Of all the warrants undergirding Western philosophy, perhaps none is so commonplace as that familiar Delphic injunction, “Know thyself.” But what exactly is the value of knowing ourselves? How much of the self is knowable? What are the methods

by which we come to know ourselves? To help students explore these questions for themselves, Professor Mitchell Green has designed a course called “Know Thyself” that centers around two key questions. First, *What is it?* That is, what is self-knowledge, how do we see or experience it, and

how do we cultivate it? And second, *Why is it such a big deal?* That is, why does it matter? What are the implications of asserting, as Socrates did, that an unexamined life is not worth living?

Culled from a wide array of traditions, eras, and disciplines, reading assignments range from Plato’s *Five Dialogues* to Descartes’ *Meditations on First Philosophy* to Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* to Herrigel’s *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Through

these readings, students encounter philosophical problems that have a direct bearing on the problem of self-knowledge: the nature of mind and rationality; the relationship between affective, cognitive, and behavioral intelligence; the aspects of self and other that aren't available through introspection. Paper topics and test questions then ask students to examine some of these texts' claims, and then to take a stance on their validity and relevance. For example, students might examine Socrates' assertion that the unexamined life is not worth living in light of the example of Mary of Moldova, a young woman who devotes so much of her energy to serving impoverished and oppressed populations that she has no time for self-examination. What would Socrates' say about the worth of her life? Is one life more worth living than the other, simply because one has the privilege and time that lends itself to self-examination?

The course's contemplative component supplements this inquiry by giving students the opportunity to explore other ways of knowing themselves—ways that may not even be wholly available to the cognitive or even conscious mind. Through dream interpretation they explore the role that the unconscious can play in the path to self-knowledge. Students are also invited to arrive ten minutes early to class for sitting meditation, and classes include “meditative moments,” when students have the opportunity to engage in such practices as box breathing, bamboo breathing, or focusing on part of the body or the breath. Students also contemplate koans. Koans help them students see what happens when we jam the habitual gears of our conscious mind: we become more aware of those habitual ways of thinking, leading to a form of self-knowledge not available to direct (and habitual) introspection. Through these practices, students are able to conduct their own inquiry

into self-knowledge and whether it is what Western philosophy has claimed.

**Cressida Heyes, Professor of Philosophy,  
University of Alberta**

Much of Cressida Heyes' recent work as a feminist philosopher has revolved around one question: how are different bodily practices understood within a culture of normalization, and to what effect? For Heyes, this question of how our bodies are quantified, commodified, and disciplined in a culture of normalization has concrete consequences—consequences that can be felt not only “out there,” in the real world, but also “in here,” in the university classroom. Universities are, after all, one of the key places where subjectivity gets shaped, as students learn to sit all in a row, take copious notes, and gauge how good they are by their test scores. As part of her inquiry into philosophies of the body, Heyes has for several years been teaching a course that examines—and challenges—these normalizing practices. Through readings culled from both feminism and philosophy, that course taught students how to recognize some of the subtle ways power disciplines its subjects and teaches them to police themselves.

But something was missing from that course. Although Heyes' courses were successful as far as they went, she couldn't help but notice: students may have been learning how to pose the appropriate questions and answer them satisfactorily, but the material still didn't, as Heyes puts it, “feel real to them.” In fact, in some ways, teaching philosophies of the body in the same old way, with students seated all-in-a-row, only reenacted the very normalizing practices students were learning to critique. In response to this discomfiting irony, Heyes radically revised the course with an eye for bringing theory and practice, *knowing that* and *knowing how*, into conversation with each other.

Instead of merely studying how power works on the body, students would explore a kind of epistemology of the body, an approach through which the body itself is a means of inquiry.

The result was a real oddity in the traditional university curriculum: an upper-level Philosophy course cross-listed with Physical Education. As the cross-listing suggests, the course consists of two components. One day a week, students attend a seminar, in which they discuss readings on the philosophy of the body from a number of perspectives—

epistemological, phenomenological, political. The seminar also incorporates Vipassana meditation and other physical activities aimed at making the material “more real” to students. For example, students read Iris Marion Young’s “Throwing like a Girl,” a philosophical inquiry into the ways our culture shapes our bodies, down to every micromovement we make (or don’t make).

According to Young, men tend to orient toward “yon,” while women tend to stick closer to “hither.” E.g., male-dominated sports entail barreling down a field toward a goal (yon), while women exhibit a tendency to move well within a perceived close or closed space, as in skipping rope (hither). To help students feel this difference for themselves, Heyes leads them through an exercise that asks them to cross an imaginary stream as a woman might, and then again as a man. The difference is not only visible; it is visceral.

The other component of the course expands on this experiential encounter with the material by moving it into a physical education space, where Heyes, an experienced yoga practitioner and teacher, leads the

students in a yoga practice. There again, they explore, the hither and yonness of their own bodies. They become more aware of the energy and limits of their own bodies. They begin to experience their own bodies as a means of inquiry and self-knowledge. And they learn, through practice, to simply observe, non-judgmentally, their own minds and bodies throughout the process. Coupled with the readings and activities of the seminar, the regular yoga practice brings students’ awareness not only to the ways in which bodies in general have historically been

disciplined, but also to the ways in which *their* bodies have been disciplined. To facilitate this awareness, students also keep a journal, in which they reflect on their process and practice.

The course is not without its challenges, however. For one thing, few students who sign up for a philosophy course, even one focused on the philosophy of the body, are prepared for the kind of encounters—with the course material but also with themselves—that a course like

Heyes’ engenders. A course that challenges them to go so far beyond the bounds of traditional philosophy is bound to raise questions—and anxiety levels—for students. How will they be evaluated? If the objective is to observe my own practice without judgment, then how will the professor know if I am good enough? How will I? What place does my own visceral experience have in an environment that has taught me to leave my body at the classroom door?

Heyes too has concerns: How and where does the contemplative fit into the larger university structure, one that is built to engage the brain and keep it busy at all times, and where body and spirit both are suspect? And, more specifically, how to integrate the



analytical and physical objectives of the course, and how to evaluate the outcomes of both? After consulting with colleagues in physical education, Heyes decided that the final evaluation of the physical component would be a silent self-directed yoga practice called Mysore practice. This would allow students the freedom to move through the poses at their own pace. At the same time, their practice would demonstrate the degree to which they had mastered the poses, as well as whether they had achieved a realistic assessment of their limits, capabilities, and self-knowledge.

**Steven Emmanuel, Professor of Philosophy,  
Virginia Wesleyan College**

Historically, contemplation and activism have often been conceived as opposites. The former is about *being*; the latter is about *doing*. There may be a time and a season for both, but different times, different seasons. Yet, as many contemplative educators are exploring through their work, this opposition doesn't hold up upon further examination. On the contrary: the contemplative is often the ground from which authentic action springs.

One pedagogical approach that has typically attempted to bridge the gap between contemplation and action has been service learning. By putting knowledge into action, service learning bridges the gap between the ivory tower and the community. And, as Steven Emmanuel is discovering through his work, the contemplative has the potential to both expand and deepen this endeavor by exploring such questions as: How do we identify communities in need of service? What is our place in these communities? What is the relationship between server and served? "Contemplative practice," writes Emmanuel, "with its emphasis on cultivating mindfulness, can help students understand that serving others involves much more than the activity of building a house for the homeless or

preparing a meal for the hungry. The cultivation of mindfulness can help them learn how to be fully present in these activities, fully present to the people they are serving." The result is a more transformative experience for both students and the community alike, as students come into more direct, more compassionate contact with forms of both suffering and strength that they had previously known only as an abstraction.

**Allen Stairs, Associate Professor of Philosophy,  
University of Maryland**

How do we define happiness? How do we define well-being? What constitutes personal identity? What is wisdom? And what could meditation have to do with achieving these things? As part of his 2006-7 Fellowship with the Center, Allen Stairs developed a course called "Contemplation, Well-Being, and Personal Identity" that gives students a chance to explore these and other philosophical questions through contemplative practice.

Early in the course, students receive basic instruction in Vipassana, or "mindfulness" meditation from Stairs, followed by a more extensive instruction from a senior teacher at the Insight Meditation Community of Washington, Dr. Hugh Byrne. In addition to practicing in class, students are required to meditate on their own at least three times a week and to keep a journal in which they report and reflect on their practice. At the same time, they also study mindfulness meditation from a more empirical perspective, through assigned texts and guest lecturers who can speak to what is known about the neurological, psychological, and medical effects of mindfulness meditation.

With this ground in place, students then explore the connections between mindfulness and the "problem" of self-identity. In particular, the class examines how mindfulness meditation's notion of identity—that identity is a construct, and that there is no

such thing as an enduring self—might both complement and complicate Western notions of identity. Through readings ranging from the ancients to contemporary positive psychology, the class conducts a comparative analysis of different conceptions of personal identity. As part of this inquiry, students read closely the works of David Hume and Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit, both of whose notions of personal identity accord with that of the Buddhist doctrine of *annata*, or the view of the enduring self as a construct we make as solid and enduring.

The class then explores the implications that these notions of identity have for how we construct the notion of wisdom. In Parfit's view, wisdom means seeing things as they are, and it arises from our realization that the solidity we ascribe to our thoughts and feelings are in fact an illusion; the thoughts and feelings that make up "me" are, in fact, impermanent and insubstantial. And, insofar as it is a means of observing and detaching from the thoughts and perceptions that make up that "me," meditation is one of the primary routes to that wisdom. As Stairs' class explores, such a concept of wisdom has important implications for how we go about philosophizing, perhaps offering some protection against the danger of becoming what Stairs refers to as PITGOATs, or People in the Grasp of a Theory. Instead, Parfit's view lends itself to a BUDAist approach: i.e., Believe Ungraspably, Don't Attach.

But "Contemplation, Well-Being, and Personal Identity" is not intended as a hard sell for Buddhist (or BUDAist) notions of identity and wisdom. Rather than accepting this view uncritically, students are encouraged to examine it from their own perspective, their own experience, their own practice. Specifically, they examine these questions, both through analysis and contemplative practice: What are the consequences of this "no-self" view for the value we place on

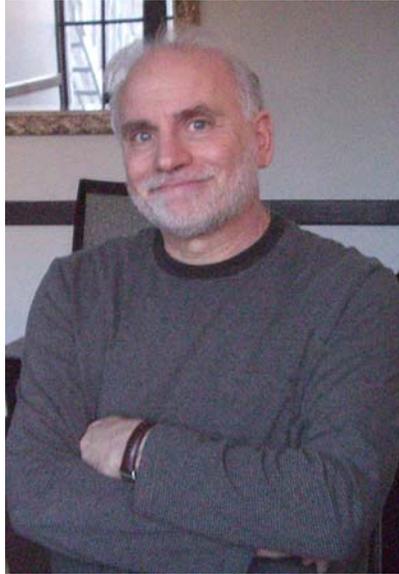
ourselves and our lives? Might the opposition between the enduring-self view and the no-self view be a false dichotomy? Might there be a middle ground, such as a more process-oriented notion of identity? And what to make of those aspects of ourselves that are not accessible to meditative observation? By giving them the cognitive and contemplative skills they need to explore these questions, Stairs' course leaves students just a little more skeptical of their own inner PITGOAT, and a little more in touch with their inner BUDA.

**David Kahane, Professor of Political Science,  
University of Alberta**

David Kahane is also interested in how the contemplative can at once counter and complement the commonplace ways we learn Philosophy. A practicing Buddhist whose academic passions straddle political science and philosophy, Kahane brings this spirit of inquiry into all his courses. In one such course, "Equality and Social Justice: Compassion, Obligation, and Global Justice," students contemplate some of the starkest realities of social justice and the ways in which their own privilege is implicated in the suffering of others. Just as they might in any course focused on ethics, students gain perspective on these issues through a close reading of such authors as Nussbaum, Tussman, and Sanger. But as Kahane emphasizes, thinking about these issues can only go so far when it comes to truly exploring social injustice and one's own relationship to it. In fact, insofar as it leaves the heart and spirit out of ethical inquiry, big "P" Philosophy might itself be implicated in our habitual dissociation from the suffering of others. Kahane's course intends to redress this dissociation by giving students the tools—intellectual, psychological, contemplative—they need, not only to think about these critical issues, but also to develop a felt sense of their full impact and implications.

Toward that end, analytical texts are balanced with more personal, inward-looking accounts, such as Ram Dass and Paul Gorman's *How Can I Help?* At the same time, contemplative practices offer students a means to confront how they themselves are implicated in global (in)justice. They receive instruction in lectio divina, Shamatha meditation, and loving-kindness meditation, through which they extend compassion to people living with wealth and poverty on a global scale. Students also free-write for 8-10 minutes twice a week in response to prompts that ask them to contemplate the suffering of another. For example, they might be given a photo of a person who is suffering—e.g., starving or victimized by violence—and be asked to look at it for several minutes, just noticing what occurs for them. Do they want to look away? Do they want to cry? Do they feel angry? Do they get bored? Free-writing afterwards, they reflect on their experience.

Not surprisingly, many students find this course as difficult as it is eye-opening. Coming face to face not only with others' suffering but also their own privilege can be painful. Yet, as Kahane makes clear to students throughout the course, the point is not to plunge them into guilt, but simply to increase their awareness of suffering and cultivate the compassion—both for others and themselves—that is called for if we are to address the realities of injustice on a global scale.



## Religious Studies

Larry Fine, Professor of Religious and Jewish Studies, Mount Holyoke College

Although Buddhist forms of meditation often get more attention in contemplative pedagogy across the curriculum, every major religion, including Judaism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Taoism, has a contemplative tradition. And for Larry Fine, to exclude these rich contemplative traditions from Religious Studies—as both objects of knowledge and a means of knowledge—would be too great a loss. By incorporating aspects of these contemplative traditions into his course, Fine offers students the opportunity to both study and experience these traditions for themselves.

Typically, about two thirds of Fine's survey course might be devoted to studying the primary texts, with the remainder of the class devoted to practicing some dimension of the contemplative tradition. In studying Buddhism, for example, students might spend the first part of the class studying one of the historical Buddhist texts and the latter part of the class working with Vipassana meditation. Or, as part of their study of Jewish mysticism, students might study passages from the Torah and then sing one of those passages.

Beyond his more general survey classes, the contemplative is built into many of Fine's courses in rich and creative ways. In a course called "Holy Feast, Holy Fast: Sacred Food in Sacred Traditions," for example, students study how eating itself has traditionally been a contemplative practice, a means of both celebrating the sacred and building community. Silent meals, meditation, and mindful eating become passages into traditions that might otherwise seem exotic or

remote to students. In another course, “The Ethics of Interpersonal Relations,” the contemplative is interwoven through all the course themes: spiritual friendship, spiritual community, humility, compassion and love for others, romantic and erotic relationship, teacher-student relationships, the cultivation of virtue, personal ethics. Once again, students begin by studying how different traditions, such as Buddhism, the Jewish Rabbinical tradition, or Christianity conceive of ethics, and then they put some of those principles into practice. They might, for example, read about how a certain tradition defines the concept of “teacher” or “friend,” and then work with one another in dyads to contemplate their own sense of what a teacher or friend is. Singing scripture, chanting, meditating, eating mindfully, engaging in ethical dialogue: all of these practices enable students to embody the subjects they are studying, bring them life, come to know them as more than just words on a page.

**David Gardiner, Associate Professor of Religion, Colorado College**

David Gardiner is currently developing an upper level course for students interested in delving deeper into Buddhism than an introductory class allows. Still a work in progress, the course will combine scholarly study with an experiential component to help students gain first-hand experience of the context, traditions, and practice of Buddhism. Primary and secondary texts will give students a solid grounding in Buddhism and the way it has traditionally been studied, while class discussion and paper assignments will offer them an opportunity to immerse themselves in Buddhism’s many dimensions—ethical, metaphysical, historical, cultural.

Alongside this more scholarly training, the course will expose students to a wide range of Buddhist practices, including meditations on death, impermanence, loving kindness, compassion, impermanence, suffering; *zazen* meditation; koan meditation, Vipassana meditation, and visualization meditations. To gain both the breadth and depth the course promises, students will be required to try all of these practices, and then to choose one or two to practice in more depth on a regular basis. Through this sustained effort, they will gain a deeper sense of Buddhism, not just as a subject or a set of beliefs, but as a path. And finally, students will round out their exploration by keeping a journal of their *own* path, in which they will explore the fits and misfits they find between the Buddhism they encounter on the page and the Buddhism they experience on the cushion. Besides gaining a background in the rich context surrounding Buddhist contemplative practice, students will walk away from Gardiner’s course with a more discerning sense of the value of these practices and why a person might or might not be drawn to them.

**Rebecca Gould, Associate Professor of Religion and Environmental Studies, Middlebury College**

As part of her Fellowship with the Center, Rebecca Gould is developing an undergraduate course investigating the relationship between religion, contemplative practice, and social change. Called “Practicing for Life: Nature, Spiritual Life, and Social Change,” the course engages students in a comparative study of figures whose lives and works offer rich examples of the different ways that “inner work” and “outer work” can be a catalyst for social justice. Though a range of issues will be addressed, the course will focus primarily on the place of the contemplative in regard to environmental concerns, such as climate change, toxins, and threats to the health of the individual and the planet.

Readings will include primary and secondary texts from a wide range of religious and contemplative traditions, including Anne Lamott, Henry David Thoreau, Thomas Merton, Thich Nhat Hanh, Viktor Frankl, Rabbi Shefa Gold, and Terry Tempest Williams. For each, Gould plans to couple the authors’ more public, political, and artistic writings with pages from their more personal, autobiographical accounts—i.e., their outer work with their inner work. Students will also read contemporary scientific literature on the relationship between healing and spiritual practice, while films and guest lectures will bring into relief the multi-dimensional contexts in which contemplative practice has already been a catalyst for social change.

At the same time, students will do some of their own inner work by engaging



some contemplative aspects of the religious traditions they are encountering, including Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism, and Judaism. In addition to reading about these traditions, students will explore them experientially through meditation, moments of silence, or chanting, as well as through field trips to a local zendo, monastery, or contemplative walking path. By giving students the opportunity to explore how their own inner and outer work can be an agent of change—personal, political, spiritual, social, and environmental—Gould hopes to create a course that will be an agent of change itself—as she puts it, an “instigator and facilitator” of students’ own inquiry.

**Harold Roth, Professor of Religious and East Asian Studies, Brown University**

For Harold Roth, one of the shortcomings of higher education is that it remains heavily biased toward what he calls “third-person learning.” Students learn how to analyze, memorize, and quantify subjects as objects—i.e., as something “out there,” separate from themselves. At the same time, the subjectivity of the knower is all but ignored. One of the values, then, of contemplative pedagogy is that it tries to bridge this rift between the knower and the known by bridging the gap between more traditional, “objective” study and what he calls “critical first-person learning.” “First-person” means that students engage directly with the practices being studied, and “critical” means that students are not asked to believe anything but, on the contrary, to evaluate their own experience with openness and discernment.

In Roth’s own courses, first-person learning takes many forms, as experiential

learning is threaded throughout the course with assignments aimed at allowing students to attain a deeper understanding of the subject matter, themselves, and others. For example, during a unit on early Chinese Confucian teachings about appropriate social rituals, students might be asked to spend a day closely observing and contemplating the social rituals they observe in their own daily life, from the dorm to the local café to their Geometry class. In doing so, they begin to build a bridge between themselves and the course material; by observing first-hand how social ritual both takes and gives shape to their own cultural circles, they can better appreciate how it does so in others’.

In Roth’s course “Theory and Practice of Buddhist Meditation,” this coupling of the third- and first-person learning, the analytic and the experiential, is even more formally embedded into the structure of the course. First developed as part of Roth’s Fellowship with the Center and revised many times since then, this course examines the theory and practice of Buddhist meditation with a particular eye for its ethical implications. In keeping with the third- and first-person pedagogy, the course has two components: a traditional seminar session and a Meditation Lab. In the seminar portion, students study and discuss readings that provide insight into the meditative and ethical dimensions of various Buddhist traditions, including Theravada, Mahayana, Ch’an, and Zen Buddhism. In the laboratory portion of the course, students meet three times per week in a Meditation Lab. Guided either by Roth himself or, in some cases, an invited expert, the labs consist of a 20-30 minute contemplative practice, followed by 5-10 minutes of written reflection and question-and-answer. During a unit on Theravada Buddhism, for example, students may try the practice of counting the breath or feeling the rise and fall of the belly. Similarly, when studying Zen, they may be asked to meditate

on a particular koan. In combining traditional academic study with direct first-hand experience, Roth finds that students are able to achieve a more discerning, open, and insightful encounter with what might otherwise seem remote and strange traditions.

**Judith Simmer-Brown, Professor of Religious Studies, Naropa University**

For Professor Judith Simmer-Brown, one of the tragedies of higher education is its tendency to stress the life of the mind at the expense of the heart and spirit. Students come to college hoping for transformation, and instead they learn how to guess what the teacher is thinking and reproduce it in papers and on tests. The challenge, as Simmer-Brown sees it, is to develop a pedagogy that reignites the kind of curiosity and impassioned inquiry students crave. One way to do so, says Simmer-Brown, is to teach religion not simply as an abstract subject but also as a means for students to study the very passions they bring to the material. One such course that Simmer-Brown teaches regularly is a graduate course called “First Turning: The Nature of Mind and Emotions.” When students first learn to observe their experience through meditation, one of the most disturbing aspects they encounter is the intensity of their own emotions. Buddhism offers a means of dealing with emotions and our relationship with them.

The classical *abhidharma* texts of fourth and fifth century Buddhism provide the core of the course. Often seen as a kind of Buddhist psychology, the *abhidharma* includes an extensive catalogue of emotional states, alongside teachings of the illusory, transitory nature of these states. For the first half of the course, students study the “wholesome” (*kusala*) emotions. In the second, they turn to the study of the *klesas*, or unwholesome emotions—the torturous states of mind such as attachment, aggression, arrogance, and ignorance.

Throughout the course, students learn to study the nature of their own emotions through the lens of primary and secondary Buddhist texts, and they also read these texts in the light of their own experience on the meditation cushion. In addition to the mid-term week-long sit that is customary at Naropa, the class includes a series of guided meditations that exercise students' capacity to observe which states of mind are more or less comfortable or familiar to them, as well as how they habitually react to those states. In one such meditation, the "bean meditation," students are given one dark bean and one light one and are asked to move each forward or back, depending on their positive or negative state of mind. Students learn to drop the storyline and just be with the experience, observe it, study it. Having cultivated the curiosity and capacity to engage with their own experience, students can then bring that curiosity and capacity back to the primary texts, to discover how the ancient teachings and their own experience might speak to one another.

## Psychology

Susan Burggraf, Professor of Contemplative Psychology, Naropa University

Contemplative practice is about more than getting to "know thyself"; it is also about connecting with others in a more compassionate way. Toward that end, Susan Burggraf has created a Social Psychology course that enables students to explore how we can achieve "shared mind" through contemplative dialogue. Burggraf's students arrive in her classroom with a largely utilitarian view of dialogue—i.e., more as a means for getting one's point across than truly speaking one's truth or taking the other person in. The challenge, then, is to help students unlearn some of their habitual ways of communicating and to relearn the kind of open, compassionate communication that once came naturally to them.

To do so, Burggraf borrows from the work of Gregory Kramer, whose concept of "insight dialogue" presents Buddhist contemplative practices through an interpersonal lens. Based on the observation that so much of our suffering tends to come into relief through our relationships with others, Kramer's approach offers a way to work with this human truth by deepening our compassion, empathy, and appreciation for one another. Though usually offered in the context of retreat or group work, Kramer's approach adapts well to an educational setting, offering a simple practice for exploring complex human problems, such as how we bridge our own inner experience and outer social life, how we negotiate the many roles we occupy, and how we shape and reshape our social identities through conversation with one another.

The practices of insight dialogue are simple: pause, breathe, open, listen, trust, be present, speak. In Burggraf's class, for example, students might begin with a brief meditation, and then break into dyads, where

they practice basic attendance and listening. To prevent them from lapsing into old habits, the content and process of the dialogue are closely prescribed: students take turns speaking for a limited amount of time (e.g., 120 seconds, 90 seconds, 20 seconds, and so on) in response to a series of prompts. “What matters to me is. . . .” “The part of my work that is most alive, or the thing that I’m working on is. . . .” “What I most appreciate about you is. . . .” While one partner speaks, the other simply listens. Each of these mini-monologues is also punctuated by a three-step instruction to “pause,” “relax,” “open,” intended to remind students to bring mindfulness to the dialogue, to drop into their bodies, and bring breath and spaciousness to the dialogue.

Though not a model for ordinary conversation, the practice of insight dialogue enables students to, as Burggraf puts it, “infiltrate” habitual social engagement with mindfulness and awareness, and to bring loving kindness into difficult dialogues. The exercise also works as a window onto another key theme of Burggraf’s course: the social construction of ideas and the shared nature of knowledge. By bringing the contemplative into ordinary conversations, students get a glimpse of the kind of shared mind that otherwise tends to get little play in higher education.

### Jared Kass, Professor of Counseling and Psychology, Lesley University

In his dual role as professor of Counseling and Psychology and co-director of the Institute for Contemplative Practice, Jared Kass is concerned with how contemplative practice translates into community. As part of his Fellowship with the Center, Kass developed a course called “Spirituality: Integrating Factor in Mental and Physical Health.” Part of a larger curriculum devoted to more holistic approaches to mental health, the course explores how, in Kass’s words, the “development of resilience—through the use of contemplative practices common to diverse spiritual traditions—can be effective in the prevention of health-risk behaviors, the promotion of pro-social behaviors, emotional and physical healing, and psychological maturation.”

Not surprisingly, much of the course is devoted to developing the kind of contemplative learning community that can support this in-depth exploration. First, the syllabus makes clear: as an interpersonal learning laboratory, the class is open to individuals representing the full spectrum of faith backgrounds and philosophical orientations. The idea is not to create a group of like minds but to undertake self-inquiry in a multi-faith learning group, where differences are not only tolerated but valued. As students learn from day one, however, the formation of such a community is not a task for the faint-hearted, and it is a process, not an event. First, students find themselves called upon to cultivate self-awareness, becoming more mindful of the thoughts, feelings, desires, and values that they bring to the process. Second, students develop a greater capacity for empathy and compassion, as they become less absorbed in self and more aware of others. This is a delicate process, one that entails becoming more in touch with both their own and others’ need for connection and safety, autonomy and vulnerability, commonality and

difference. And finally, students must also learn how to deal with conflicts—not only within the community but also within the self as they confront one of the toughest questions of all: can I be myself in community with others?

Contemplative practices offer the means of exploring this question on not only a rational but a visceral level. Through reflection, essays, chants, song, and other embodied activities, students get to know their own capacity for resilience; the nature of their underlying attitudes about self, others, and life; the behaviors and attitudes that affect the well-being of self and others; the religious, cultural, and family influences on their own spiritual identity formation; and, finally, how and where sense of self meets community.

**Willoughby Britton, Psychology Intern,  
Psychiatry and Behavioral Medicine, Brown  
University**

Sooner or later, contemplative educators bump up against two questions: What exactly are we hoping to achieve by introducing contemplative practice into the classroom, and how do we know if we are achieving those outcomes? And what subjective or objective assessments can help us determine how students are being affected by contemplative practice?

Working in concert with the Contemplative Studies Initiative at Brown University, Willoughby Britton is conducting a study aimed at addressing these questions. The study's objective is to assess the effects of meditation on the cognitive capacities, mindfulness, life meaning, emotional well-being, spirituality, and empathy of college students studying contemplative practice. Britton began by collecting anecdotal evidence through interviews with students participating in Harold Roth's Meditation Lab (see above), asking them to describe the impact meditation has had on their lives. So far, the response has been overwhelmingly

positive; the majority of students report that the meditative techniques they learned in the Lab have improved their attention span, emotional stability, motivation, and sense of life direction. Many students have also said that they have been inspired to pursue contemplative practice beyond the classroom and course.

As Britton notes, however, anecdotal evidence only goes so far; what contemplative educators are missing is empirical verification of these reported effects. Toward that end, Britton will be conducting two objective assessments. First, participants will undergo a neuropsychological test battery designed to assess the functioning of brain areas directly involved in attention, emotions, and memory—areas which are known to be impaired by stress and improved by meditation. Second, subjects will complete twenty questionnaires, such as the Mindful Attention Awareness Scale, Mindfulness Skill Questionnaire, and the Wellbeing Scale. Though still in process, Britton's study promises to give deep insight into the impact contemplative pedagogy really has, both at the meditation labs at Brown, and beyond.

## Continuing the Conversation: The Pedagogical and the Personal

In yet another dimension of contemplative practice melding the first and third persons, the dialogue in Amherst was personal as well as pedagogical. As an approach that aims not only to teach but to transform, to open students up to new ways of knowing themselves and their world, contemplative pedagogy touches students—and teachers—in profound, and often unpredictable ways. Opening one's heart and mind can be painful as well as enlivening. Waking up to one's own thoughts and feelings can be as disturbing as well as enlightening. Sensing one's body can be triggering as well as empowering. And waking up to the suffering of others can bring as much guilt as it does compassion.

Given how deeply personal and unpredictable contemplative pedagogy can be, the questions arise: How do we prepare students for the kinds of transformation that contemplative pedagogy can engender? How do we create a safe container for those transformations? What kinds of curricular and extracurricular supports can we provide them? What kind of support do we offer them when the semester is over? And what is our role in supporting their transformation? The professor's job is to teach, not to play spiritual guide or counselor. But when the goal of the course is not just proficiency but deep personal transformation, such hard and fast distinctions are never quite as clear in reality as they may appear on paper. So how can teachers take students beyond the bounds of traditional learning while still remaining within

the bounds of their own traditional professorial role? Can they?

And students aren't the only ones who may be transformed over the course of the semester. The professor, too, is likely to be profoundly affected. In the context of traditional higher education, this powerful reciprocity raises a whole other set of questions—personal, professional,



pedagogical. What do we as scholars and teachers learn from this work? What expectations—and what trepidations—do we bring with us into the contemplative classroom? If we encourage students to bring both their first and third persons to class with them, should we do the same? How much of one's own, first-person experience, or journey, does one share with the students? What is the line between teaching and

preaching, coaching and converting? What kinds of professional development and collegial support are available to professors striving to navigate these questions? What mentors can teachers turn to for guidance as they navigate these questions?

For the professors of Psychology, Philosophy, and Religious Studies gathered in Amherst, these deeply personal and pedagogical questions stand at the frontier of contemplative pedagogy.